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CHRISTIANCOURIER

Conferees discuss the merits of a confession born out of Apartheid

Bert Witvoet

LONDON, Ont. – Rev. Peter Borgdorff referred to it as the largest gathering so far to discuss the Belhar Confession since Synod 2009 delegated him to promote discussion of the document. Some 60 members of Christian Reformed churches from southern Ontario gathered at the University of Western Ontario on May 29 to hear presentations on the Belhar Confession, a document to be considered for adoption as a fourth confession by the CRC Synod of 2012. The confession originated in South Africa as a response to the injustice of Apartheid and addresses issues of racism and oppression of the poor under the rubric of unity, reconciliation and justice.

A needed document

Borgdorff led off by explaining how the confession came about, what it is saying and which denominations have already adopted the confession. He expressed pleasure at the fact that the church is showing a renewed interest in its confessional heritage, and he pointed out that confessions are useful for the purpose of identity, unity and teaching and liturgy. He stressed that the Belhar needs to be understood in its historical context. The Belhar deals with much more than race, he added, in response to some critics who find the issue of racism too narrow for a confession. It talks about unity, reconciliation and justice, themes that the church should always be busy with.

Bruce Adema, director of Canadian Ministries, followed up on Borgdorff by exploding the myth that Canada is a broadminded country that treats its minorities fairly. He cited the treatment of Chinese workers who were subjected to a head tax and could not vote until 1947, the breaking of treaties with Canada's native peoples, the forced enrolment of Native children in residential schools, and the internment and dispossession of Japanese citizens during the Second World War. "What Canada needs is for the church to raise its prophetic voice and call for justice and reconciliation." The CRC slogan of "a diverse family of healthy congregations" he also dismissed as a myth. "We have a history of racism in the CRC," he said. "*We* need the Belhar."

The Reformed Church of America adopted the Belhar on June 10, during its General Synod.

A good and imperfect document

A panel of three – Shiao Chong, campus minister at York University, Grace Miedema, member of the Committee of Contact with the Government, and Harold Roscher, director of the Edmonton Native Healing Centre – aired their views and opinions.

Chong likes the confession, although he admits that it has flaws (no more than the other three confessions, he adds), and he would like to see some footnotes added that cross-reference certain statements with articles in the other confessions. For example, he would

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Foolishness to the Greeks – and everyone else

Ian Cubitt

HALIFAX, N.S. – The crisis unfolding in Greece is a symptom of a global disease occasionally diagnosed as debt. The inability of Greece to pay its debts represents a new phase of the credit crisis that has been building over the past few years. Now that governments have joined the growing numbers of individuals and businesses unable to repay their debts, the credit crisis is set to intensify around the world.

The Bible teaches consistently that it is not wise to take on debt when there is no expectation of repayment. A year ago, governments all over the world were spending trillions of dollars more than they were collecting in taxes in a desperate attempt to create an economic recovery. Now that governments are trying to trim spending to avoid overt bankruptcy, there are significant risks that any economic recovery could be promptly reversed. When evaluating the impact that the credit crisis could have, it is worth considering the powerful force that credit expansion and credit contraction have on the economy.

Thousands of Greeks have been protesting bankruptcy-averting spending cuts.

The credit rollercoaster

During recent decades, credit has been expanding around the world. Individuals, businesses and governments have had almost unlimited access to credit and have borrowed vast sums of money. Inflation has often been the result as a growing number of dollars have been available to purchase a relatively stable supply of goods. Inflation has been such a constant companion that people frequently list it as one of their biggest financial fears.

Many people and financial advisors avoid talking about deflation because inflation has become so prevalent. Instead, they point to our government's multi-billion dollar budget deficit and the US government's multi-trillion dollar bailout binge and budget deficits as evidence that the supply of

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like to see the Belhar's statement on "true faith" linked with what the Heidelberg Catechism says about true faith. He also pointed out that racism exists all over the world.

Chong listed 12 common objections that have been raised against the Belhar: 1. The Belhar is too ambiguous. 2. It is too precise. 3. It is not comprehensive enough. 4. It's not necessary. 5. It trivializes the other confessions. 6. It's not relevant to the North-American context. 7. It's not doctrinal enough. 8. It's too political. 9. It stresses unity at the expense of truth. 10. One of its authors used it to justify homosexual practice. 11. Making true faith in Jesus Christ the only condition for inclusion in the church leaves out the importance of a Christian walk. 12. To talk about God as being in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged sounds too much like liberation theology. Chong, who does not share most of these objections, had been asked to place them before the gathering.

Grace Miedema reported on her discussions with agencies and people of the Christian Reformed Church. There is a general feeling that "we are already involved in bringing about justice to the oppressed," she said. People point to Friendship Ministries, Disability Concerns, Safe Church Committees, diaconal ministries, Coffee Break, campus ministries, the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, and the Committee for Contact with the Government. "We have to ask ourselves whether our actions promote respect for all people," she said. "The concept 'fear not' runs throughout the Bible."

Harold Roscher, a Cree who directs the Edmonton Native Healing Centre, asked the audience how many of them were treaty people. Only a few raised their hand. "You are all treaty people," he pointed out. All the treaties made with Aboriginal peoples in Canada include all Canadians. The Belhar is looking at how we can find new points of contact. Getting rid of obstacles is never done the same way, he said. Joshua used a different way of bringing down the enemy than Gideon did. The Belhar is a new way of breaking down walls. Roscher referred to the Belhar Confession as "prophetic." It presents "new hope to the Aboriginal people." Quoting Esther, he felt that "the Belhar is for such a time as this."

What difference does it make?

One conferee wondered whether adopting the Belhar will make a difference in the fight against racism. Roscher gave that question "a resounding Yes." Chong said we should not base our decisions on outcomes. Our challenge is to follow Jesus. Adema pointed out that by adopting it we raise the fight against racism from political correctness to confessional integrity.

The reverse question was also asked: What difference does it make if we *don't* adopt the Belhar? According to Borgdorff, it will be read in different ways by various partners. In South Africa, "some churches will rejoice; others will be disappointed." He also indicated that it would be a huge disappointment to the ethnic communities in the CRC, all of whom pretty much support the Belhar. The Belhar vindicates their experience of discrimination in the North American context. Borgdorff took a swipe at the position taken by Dr. John Bolt of Calvin Seminary (Bolt opposes adopting the Belhar, as is evident from his articles in recent issues of the *Christian Courier*). "Bolt misses the point," says Borgdorff. "He focuses on the intellectual rather than the emotional side."

Harold Roscher, Grace Miedema, Peter Borgdorff, Shiao Chong and Bruce Adema addressed questions from the audience.

Chong said, "It depends on how it is rejected and by what margin. I love the CRC; I fell in love with its theology, its world and life view." Saying No to the Belhar would hurt, though, he admitted. "It would hurt to find something negative in your spouse you did not know about before."

Harold Roscher was especially forceful in saying that a rejection would make it very difficult for him to promote the CRC in his community. "I need a louder voice in my community. There is already too much cynicism about the Christian Church." He made it clear that he would be more than annoyed "if we are too chicken to adopt this statement about racism."

Asked whether the Belhar could not be adopted as a contemporary testimony instead of a confession, Borgdorff said that a testimony by its very nature is individual, belonging to one church, whereas a confession by its very nature is ecumenical. He sees the Belhar as a gift presented to other denominations. He does not think the CRC has the right to tinker with it.

Free to debate?

Conferee Rev. Richard Vander Vaart felt that the presentations had been informative and had advanced the discussion, but to him it had felt a bit like a cheering session for the Belhar.

Rudy Eikelboom said about the conference, "It was a good introduction to the Belhar for me. I liked the introduction to what is actually a very short document. My suspicion is that it appeals to the 'left side' of the CRC, whereas the 'right side' of the CRC would have some issues."

High school student Elayna Vander Vaart asked whether people might be afraid to oppose the Belhar out of fear they would be perceived as racist, and whether they would just be shot down all together with no chance of explaining themselves. Adema replied that "voting against the Belhar does not mean that people are racist. On the other hand, being in favour does not mean either that some people want the church to become a political committee."

Esteban Lugo, CRCNA Director of Race Relations, took a potshot at the proposition that the CRC needs to take baby steps in these matters. "After 50 years of SCORR [the Synodical Committee on Race Relations was established in 1971] we need to take baby steps!? Look honey, our 50-year-old child is taking his first baby steps!" he said mockingly.

Borgdorff emphasized that we must "try to find common ground and permit the opportunity for a vigorous debate."

Bert Witvoet is co-editor of CC and lives in St. Catharines, Ont.

Foolishness *continued from page 1*

money is expanding at a rapid rate, fuelling the risk of inflation. The money supply, however, is much more complex than what the government spends on bailouts and deficits. A significant portion of the expansion in the money supply is achieved through banks issuing loans. In February, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that total loans outstanding at banks in the US were decreasing at an annual rate of over seven percent – the sharpest decline since the Great Depression. This decrease in the money supply happened despite interest rates declining to just over zero percent. Contracting credit equals fewer dollars in the system to pay for a relatively stable supply of goods. That sounds like deflation.

Dangers of deflation

Most people are familiar with the dangers of inflation: it takes more dollars to buy the same amount of goods. Many people try to protect their assets from inflation by investing in stocks, real estate or real-return bonds. Hardly anyone, however, pays much attention to the risks of deflation, even though it's often more painful than inflation. Symptoms of deflation can already be seen in many parts of the global economy: millions of people being laid off; price declines in real estate, commodities and other assets; reluctance on

the part of banks to loan money to individuals and businesses; and governments getting close to defaulting on their debts. It is worth considering that if deflation makes asset values decline, the relative purchasing power of cash in the bank will increase even without earning interest. Conversely, deflation increases the weight of debt as debt defaults, wage cuts, layoffs, reductions in consumer spending and thrift cause a reduction in the amount of money in circulation and an increase in the relative value of each dollar in circulation.

Forgetting the past

In general, we do a terrible job of learning from past mistakes. As Ecclesiastes says, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, 'Look! This is something new'? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time"(1:9-10). Economic cycles reflect the truth of this passage. Unfortunately, most of the significant economic periods of upheaval have little impact on how we decide to manage our financial resources today. The memory of the Dutch Tulip Mania of the 1630s, the South Sea Bubble of 1720, the deflationary bear markets of the 1830s and 1930s when fifty percent of countries were in external default on their debts or were forced to restructure their debts, and the "Irish raises" (annual reduction in wages) that my 95-year-old neighbour's father experienced in the Great Depression have been largely forgotten. Someday these will happen again.

Taking action

Each of these painful periods of economic upheaval contains lessons from which we can learn. Our current global economy is in a state of upheaval, and the only certainty is continued economic uncertainty. There are a few ways, however, to prepare for and help mitigate its negative effects: Believe that God owns it all. Have some physical cash at home. Spend less than you earn. Have emergency savings. Avoid the use of debt. Think long-term by setting financial goals. Talk with a financially wise older person and learn from their experience of previous economic shocks. Finally, read about deflationary periods in history and consider the way that deflation causes real estate, commodities, bonds, wages and purchases from businesses to fall (see sidebar above).

While the Greek economic crisis may have slipped from front page headlines, the underlying problem of unpayable debt still remains. Indeed, deflationary forces are being felt even on our own country's economy as the Bank of Canada Governor warns that credit contraction is a major risk to economic growth. If the deflation bear continues to rear its head, it is likely that the results will be similar to the deflationary periods experienced in previous generations. Now is the time to consider how the next wave of the credit contraction may impact our own lives.

Ian Cubitt (iancubitt@gmail.com) is a Chartered Accountant with a passion for farming and finances. He is a tax manager at a national accounting firm in Halifax and is excited to be starting a new job as a tax manager in Mount Forest, Ontario in August.

Now online:

For more information on Cubitt's eight tips for financial health, go to *www.christiancourier.ca* and read "Financial action steps for economic uncertainty," the companion piece to this article.

Fumbling with fertility

I was chatting with some colleagues over lunch and the conversation turned to children. Both my colleagues said they and their partners were not interested having children, partly for personal reasons, partly for broader ethical reasons.

"The world is over-populated already," said one.

"The last thing the planet needs is another consumer," said the other. "Why do you have kids?"

I did not have a response ready. "Children are the fruit of love," I blurted, but then my mind went blank.

I've always wanted to have children, and though I'd heard the environmental argument before, I do not recall ever receiving a teaching on this subject directly from church or Christian college. I suppose we generally take it for granted that children are a blessing from God, and to have "one's quiver full" is a half-joke that relays the fading conviction that having many descendents is a form of wealth. On the whole, however, family planning has become a "private matter" that teachers and preachers hesitate to address.

This is unfortunate, given the centrality of reproduction to human life. If what many Christian writers have said is true – that "sex is a communal act," meaning it is not merely a private matter but deeply interrelated with the life of the whole community, questions such as the following deserve intense conversations: What are good reasons for having children? What are children for? When and how many?

Childless societies don't last

The overall picture, economically speaking, is that social welfare is threatened by the falling fertility rates of the world's most affluent. While for some childlessness is not a choice, for the majority without children, being "childfree" is simply a preferred lifestyle. One professor summarizes the current reality: "Children are culturally optional, economically burdensome, and technologically avoidable." Education, recreation, and career dominate our lives, and children become an interruption. This private childfree luxury is the public's childless poverty.

Conservative Christians buck the trends to a certain degree, but they are not immune to the pressures. In many Reformed circles people have larger families than the average in Canada, but still generally have smaller families than a generation or two ago. Calvin College enrollment is declining, and one obvious reason is that alumni are not having as many children.

It is true that Jesus and Paul, according to the Bible, did not have children. Jesus does not "focus on the family" but rather on the kingdom of God, which is a wide embrace of all kinds of people, and first of all those who are poor, lonely, or disdained by the broader culture. If we ask, "What would Jesus do?" when it comes to issues of family planning, the discussion would be very short.

Yet he did say, "Let the little children come to me." It was a model of life in the kingdom of God. We might say he was affirming God's bountiful creation – how the flourishing of human life comes with the laughter of children. In other words, having children is hard-wired into human beings – both a biological and cultural mandate, and when they are trained to be agents of renewal, the whole world sings.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has said

having children is a way of practicing hospitality to strangers. It forces one out of one's own natural selfishness to live for others who are, at least at the start, helpless, at times annoying, and inevitably disturbers of regular, deep sleep. Children can make your heart warm with cute smiles and innocent questions, make your heart burn with a proud fire when they graduate, and can crush your heart when they make decisions that seem wasteful or wrong. They will walk out your door some day, leaving you looking something like the Velveteen Rabbit: worn out, tattered and tired. If you are fortunate, they may come back to care for you, and grieve for you as you age and die.

> "In our own time, the whole of Greece has been subject to a low birthrate and a general decrease of the population, owing to which cities have become deserted and the land has ceased to yield fruit…. For as men had fallen into such a state of pretentiousness, avarice, and indolence that they did not wish to marry, or if they married to rear children born to them, or at most as a rule one or two of them,… the evil rapidly and insensibly grew." – Polybius @ 150 B.C.E

Eternal Student

Peter Schuurman

Three is a crowd

My wife and I are expecting our third child this coming Reformation Day. It's interesting how measured the general response has been to this pregnancy, as compared to the elation that greeted our first pregnancy.

"Oh. Was this planned?" asked one friend.

"Are you guys OK with that?" responded another.

At the university, multiple professors joked: "Oh, is this number 11 or 12?"

It is clear that with three children we are crossing a line in the eyes of some people. We were called "the million dollar family" with one child of each gender, but I wonder if now we are perceived as masochistic, ecologically irresponsible or just crazy. My wife and I are both the second child of five, so we do not feel we are generating a large brood. We do believe, however, that having siblings to play and fight with is a great gift. A gift worthy of passing down another generation. Consider it an act of hope.

Peter Schuurman lives in Guelph, Ontario where he parents his two children, Joseph and Petra. He is working towards his PhD and teaches World Religion at Redeemer.

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Connecting with our offspring

Bert Witvoet

A year or so ago, as an elder in our church, I paid a home visit to a man who had served in Indonesia. He was in his 80's. He told me a story even his wife had not heard before. For the sake of anonymity I will refer to him as Peter.

Peter served in Indonesia in the Dutch army after the Second World War. He was there for a year and a half, not very long. But the experience has left him with traumatic feelings of shame and pain. He doesn't want to talk about it. His middle-aged children don't know what it was like. Peter says it's better to let it lie. He has made peace with himself, he says, but his wife tells me that he still has nightmares about it. He is 84; his health is failing. He is content with his life and hopeful about the future. He trusts in God. Why bring up a painful experience from the past?

One day, one of his sons said to him, "I don't really know you, Dad."

"How does that make you feel, Peter?" I said to him. Peter reflected a bit, and then he said, "There are certain things you don't need to talk about." He didn't really answer my question. I wanted to know how he felt about that over-arching, soul-searing statement of his son. It seemed that there was a deep chasm between him and his son. He had apparently not shared much of his inner life with his children, including his experiences in Indonesia.

I began to probe a little. He began to tell me how he was on patrol one day with his platoon. They walked single file along a road. A man was standing at the side of the road holding a baby in his arms. The platoon walked by this man without incident. Then, suddenly, a minute or so after they had passed the man, they heard shots. The man with the baby was shooting at them from behind. The last man in the platoon quickly turned around, aimed his sten gun at the man and the baby, and sprayed them with bullets, killing both instantly. "War is evil," said Peter.

Memories bridge time

On May 25 this year, it was 60 years ago that my family set foot on Canadian soil for the first time. My widowed mother, Grietje, and her "seven little goats," as a cousin of hers affectionately called us kids, stepped off the gangplank at Pier 21 in Halifax and began a brand new life. The oldest son, George was 19; the youngest child, Fred, was four. I was in the middle and almost 16.

Two days before this anniversary, the now expanded Witvoet tribe, reduced by two (my mother and my oldest brother, George, undertook a more final emigration), met to commemorate this event. I read from a diary I had kept around the time of our immigration. I noted in January of 1950 that there was talk about the possibility of going to Canada. Four months later we boarded the Volendam in Rotterdam harbour. How come it went so fast? My mother's older brother had left Holland for Canada as an 18-year-old in 1928, and had become a Canadian citizen. His sponsorship assured a quick issuing of a visa.

Stories like the ones in that diary help to keep our family history alive. Our children and grandchildren need to know our stories. Some stories are so important that the world needs to know. My family story is not one of them. There are thousands of such stories of heroism and sacrifice. But they should be shared with our offspring.

Reliving the past

One day after our family's get-together, I met a man who had also immigrated from the Netherlands. He was in his early 20s when the war broke out. His story about a narrow escape from the German SS troops was dramatic and chilling. Anyone who knows about what happened in the little village of Putten in October, 1944, knows about the burning down of 87 houses and the death of 540 men in concentration camps in retaliation for the hostage-taking of one German officer, somewhere between Putten and Nijkerk. In order to save Putten, resistance fighters released the captured officer, but to no avail. The Germans chose Putten as the place that would feel their wrath.

I asked the man whether he had written down his story. He said, No. I urged him to get a tape recorder and record his story for the sake of his children and grandchildren. At age 85 his faculties are still in good order, but he is nearing the end of his life. His story might get lost for those who need to hear it. He promised to seriously think about it.

Stories connect

It's an unnerving experience to go through such an incident, and who can blame the first man, Peter, for not wanting to relive it? But I brought up his relationship with his children and grandchildren. Wouldn't it be good for them to know some of his stories, especially the ones that made an impact on him? I pointed to the Bible that was lying in front of me. "This is God's story, Peter. God wants us to read it so that we can be connected with him. Your children need to know some of your stories so they can be connected with you."

There is a richness of experience in stories. Peter can tell them why he hates war so much, and how senseless the battlefield can be. His first-hand view of how an army conducts itself in the theatre of war can be instructive. His fine sensitivities can demonstrate to his grandchildren how they can resist an evil command.

We don't know how many years Peter has left here on earth, but they will not be many. The window of opportunity is closing in on him. It would be sad if this son of his would stand at his graveside and say, "I didn't really know you, Dad, and I guess I never will in this life."

Bert Witvoet is co-editor of CC and lives in St. Catharines, Ontario.

Christian Courier

Founded in 1945

An independent biweekly that seeks to engage creatively in critical Christian journalism, connecting Christians with a network of culturally savvy partners in faith for the purpose of inspiring all to participate in God's renewing work within his fallen creation.

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Web site: www.christiancourier.ca

Publications Mail Registration No. 09375

We acknowledge the assistance of the Government of Canada, through the Publications Assistance Program (PAP), toward our mailing costs.

Canada

'In all thy sons command'

Al Wolters

The official English version of the Canadian national anthem begins as follows: "O Canada! Our home and native land! True patriot love in all thy sons command." This reference to sons (and not daughters) has been something of a thorn in the flesh for feminists and their sympathizers for many years. It has often been suggested that the wording should be changed to a more gender-neutral version. A website in support of a bill which would enact such a change gathered statements of support from all kinds of leading citizens, from the President of the University of Toronto to the moderator of the United Church of Canada to the Director of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

On March 3, 2010, it seemed that this change would finally become a reality. In the Throne Speech read by the Governor-General of Canada, Michaëlle Jean, the government officially proposed to substitute the original English version of the anthem, composed in 1908, which had the inoffensive wording "in all thou dost command." It turns out that the present version, with the reference to "sons," was actually not officially adopted until 1980. (Political sensitivities have certainly changed over the last thirty years!) All the political parties in parliament endorsed the change.

Linguistic common sense?

Then something very remarkable happened. There was a barrage of popular protest. Suddenly it seemed as though no one wanted to tamper with the national anthem in its current form. Bloggers, callers-in to radio talk shows, writers of letters to the editor, people interviewed on the street were overwhelmingly predisposed to reject this initiative. As a result, within forty-eight hours the word came from the Prime Minister's Office that the proposal was being withdrawn.

I was flabbergasted. Not so much by the government's quick change of course, but by the entirely unexpected wave of popular support for the post-1980 official version of the national anthem, with its patently non-"inclusive" (if not indeed blatantly sexist) lyrics. I was at a loss to find an explanation for it. How could there be such a disconnect between the consensus of the chattering classes and the received political wisdom of the country's leaders, on the one hand, and the vocal public reaction, on the other?

Could it have something to do with the fact that the Winter Olympics had just been held in Vancouver, and Canadians had done very well there, with the result that the national anthem had frequently and proudly been heard and sung throughout the land? Or could it be that there is some kind of common sense which is asserting itself, a linguistic common sense which refuses to buy the line that "sons" necessarily excludes daughters, or that expressions like "he who hesitates is lost" is only talking about half of the human race?

Rejection of ideology?

We have all been taught to think so since 1980, but is it really true? To my mind there is something deeply counter-intuitive to this claim, and I am not persuaded that my sentiments on the matter can be explained as simply the result of a deeply ingrained misogyny on my part. I would like to think of the swift, broad, and massive public opposition to the revision of "O Canada" as being, at least in part, an indication of a true sense of the workings of language which cannot be entirely obliterated by ideology.

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Miscellaneous

Desired intimacy

Roger Wind

Because of numerous stories of sexual abuse on the part of clergy, teachers and other officials, intimate relations between caregivers and patients are absolutely forbidden at the cost of dismissal and prosecution. Guidelines and protocols [in the Netherlands] have been refined also in the field of mental patient care. Touching and erotic expressions between caregiver and patient are forbidden. Accepting presents and meetings outside of working hours are forbidden. Contact in private life, exchanging private information, private telephone numbers, sending short messages, emailing with patients by a caregiver are forbidden. It is right that there are clear and strict rules to indicate boundaries between clients and caregivers, exactly because of the power imbalance that exists by definition.

And yet, however strange this may sound in light of the previous comments, more clients complain about distance and inaccessibility and the lack of understanding and warmth on the part of the caregiver than about too much intimacy. The last thing despairing and dependent patients are waiting for is a distant, cool, clinical approach from their caregiver.

During my training as a caregiver our mentor hammered home the ground rules for the pastorate: Maximum closeness that keeps a safe distance. But the emphasis was on closeness.

This morning I came to the church service in our chapel. I was late because of an earlier church service in one of the neighbouring villages. Everyone was already there, including Mrs. Van Meteren. She is 83 years old and has been a widow for a long time. Physically she is very weak and is able to be active only a few hours per day. Attending the Sunday worship service belongs to those few hours. I entered and greeted everyone with a handshake. I kissed my life companion. "I wouldn't mind one of those myself," said Mrs. Van Meteren. Everyone laughed, but it was clear what she meant. She had no one to give her a kiss, except for her children.

Embrace without touch

This made me think of Elise. It's maybe 10 years ago already since then. Elise was 25 at that time and an attractive young woman. She was addicted to alcohol and suffered from borderline disorder. She had difficulties with relationships – it was all or nothing. She had discontinued her psychiatric treatments in the clinic and lived by herself. Other than an occasional friend who came and went she had no one. I visited her every two weeks. She talked about everything that bothered her: her parents and the sexual abuse by older men, about drinking, God and the devil. She talked of her fears and hidden desires. I would sit near her and drink coffee. I didn't really know what to do or say. I knew only that I had to keep on coming. Sometimes I thought: "I'm going to take her with me and I'm going to take care of her. She can live with us."

At the same time, I knew that would be the worst thing I could do. I'm very glad that at that time I had colleagues with whom I could discuss these things in confidence. After a year and a half, things did not improve very much with her. She drank too much and cut herself. She wanted to die but did not dare. She cried. When I left, she said at the door, "I would love to embrace you without touching you." That was desired intimacy. I could not come closer, but it was close enough.

Roger Wind (roger.wind@ggzfriesland.nl) is a pastor and active as spiritual caregiver with GGZ Friesland. This excerpt was taken from the April 27 issue of Friesch Dagblad and translated by Bert Witvoet

'In all thy sons command' *continued*

My view on this matter is partly shaped by the fact that I am an evangelical Christian and a biblical scholar. Among other things, this means that I have a high view of biblical authority, and have some knowledge of the biblical languages. If the currently prevalent view, that the use of masculine nouns and pronouns in a generic or representative way is non-"inclusive," is in fact sexist and therefore profoundly discriminatory, then we must admit that the Bible is a sexist book throughout. However, as a believer I am more inclined to let the Bible judge a particular current ideology, than to have that ideology judge the Bible. When Jesus says that "he who believes in the Son has eternal life" (a gender-accurate translation of John 3:36), I do not believe that he is excluding female believers. Nor is the apostle Paul, when he speaks of "the adoption of sons," excluding the daughters of God.

Perhaps the citizenry of Canada, in so massively repudiating the proposed gender-sensitive revision of their national anthem, were being (at least in this respect) more biblical than they realized.

Albert Wolters is emeritus professor of Religion & Theology and classical studies at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario.

We appreciate your feedback!

CC's editors have always valued the comments our readers send by mail and email. Now is your chance to let us know what you really think of the new CC: turn to page 19 for our first bi-annual Readers' Survey. You can also complete the survey online at www.christiancourier.ca.

More about Carl Tuyl

Dr. John Van Dyk from Sioux Center, Iowa, responded to our coverage of Carl Tuyl's legacy by saying he could write a book about his three years with the Tuyls while he was a student at Calvin College. He testifies that "Carl's steadfast trust in the Lord and his unwavering zest for life served as a rudder to slow down my drift away from the Christian faith towards a growing fascination with existentialist philosophy…. "

"I met the Tuyl family on the day of my arrival in Grand Rapids, ready (or not) to begin several years of study at Calvin College. Carl was in his last year of college, headed for the seminary. My brother Jan, who was then in his first charge as a pastor in the Burlington CRC, brought me to the holy city. Somehow he had become acquainted with Carl. While our recall of the details has faded, we do remember that the three of us stood in the living room of their rented home on Logan Street. Carl was big, my brother was bigger, and I was in between, all of us towering over Martha. We soon agreed on $15 a week for room and board. I was welcome to join the family…."

Read more from John Van Dyk about his time boarding with Carl Tuyl on the *Christian Courier* website: www.christiancourier.ca/Tuyl.html

CRC synod has heavy agenda this year

Marian Van Til, *with files from CRC Communications*

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. – As this issue of *Christian Courier* was being compiled the 2010 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church had not yet convened, but by the time readers receive this issue the week-long denominational gathering will have come to an end.

Meeting from June 12-18 at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Illinois, outside of Chicago, this year's synod had a heavier agenda than it has seen in many years. Five major reports and several other important issues were discussed.

The reports included: Abuse Victims Task Force Report; Church Order Revision; The Immigration/Migration Report; Faith Formation: Children at the Lord's Table; and a Form of Subscription Report.

Other issues addressed included the joint Reformed Church in America/ Christian Reformed Church translation of the church's doctrinal standards (the *Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort* and *Heidelberg Catechism*), a revised ecumenical charter, and interfaith dialogue.

For the computer savvy, the 2010 Synod Agenda is on the Synodical Resources page of the CRCNA website under "Synod 2010." Agenda books were also been mailed to every individual congregation. For the first time, an online discussion forum was created for reports and other synod-related matters, available on the new CRC Network website.

CC will carry a run-down of important synodical discussion and decisions on the church pages of the July 12 issue.

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Member of Canadian Church Press and Evangelical Press Association

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two yrs. (48 issues)	$90.00	

Advertising deadlines: display and classified advertising: Wednesday, 9 a.m. (12 days before publication date) See classified pages or web site **www.christiancourier** for more details.
(ISSN 1192-3415) Published second and fourth Mondays of the month.

Address all correspondence to: 5 Joanna Dr, St. Catharines ON L2N 1V1
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PRINTED IN CANADA

News

Britain's coalition makes politics look promising again

Brendan Kooy

All eyes were on the world's oldest and most storied parliamentary system as England went into April elections, with many predicting not only a shift in the governing party but also an end to the recent stretch of elected majority governments. The pundits proved to be right, as David Cameron's Conservatives were elected to power in a minority fashion.

What happened next was an interesting study in democracy and Westminster-style politics. In a country with such inexperience with minority governments – the recent election produced the first since World War II – no one was certain what would come next. The British have traditionally viewed minority situations, or "hung parliaments," as a complete non-starter. Rather than force voters back to the polls, however, discussion on an alternative solution turned to talk of the dreaded C-word: coalition.

Thanks to the events of the last two years in Canadian federal politics, many Canadians are well-informed about what a coalition means. When Liberals and New Democrats, with the support of the Bloc Quebecois, were on the brink of overthrowing the Conservative government in late 2008, Canadians were split between judging it an unconstitutional, immoral unification with 'separatists and socialists' or a move to truly better represent Canada's voting constituency. Even though nothing came of the 2008 talks, the word "coalition" continues to circulate in Canada's backroom political circles.

The right foot forward

In Britain, it was not a question of *how* to proceed with a minority government; it was a question of *if* the country could proceed with a minority government. Unlike the Canadian interpretation of coalition politics, however, the British did things right. Immediately upon realizing their minority situation, a series of concise and focused political negotiations commenced, with deference given to the Conservatives for having the greatest minority share of seats in the House of Commons. Within a mere five days, an impressive and yet surprising agreement had been hammered out between the Tories and the Liberal Democrats, forging a historic alliance between right and left. And with that, it was all over.

For Canadian onlookers, this seems absurd. No accusations of treason? No backstabbing? No anti-coalition petitions? Who would have thought moderate political civility was possible in the midst of a coalition. Differences remain, however, between the coalition agreement witnessed in Britain and the coalition ideas that have surfaced recently in Canada.

Key differences in Britain

First, the issue of timeliness. With an unwillingness to even *consider* returning to the House of Commons with a minority government, it was a "coalition or bust" approach. Simply put, David Cameron knew that if his party wasn't successful in making a deal, he risked losing power altogether. Canada, on the other hand, can be governed effectively with a minority parliament (for the most part), so that in similar tight situations politicians are not as motivated to look for alternatives like coalitions. Instead, and especially recently, the idea of a coalition has only been raised at times of political instability and unhappiness as a way to overthrow the governing party.

There are effective checks and balances in the Westminster parliamentary system to hold minority governments accountable, which have proven effective in Canada. If the governing party loses the confidence of the House, a non-confidence vote should take voters back to the polls. Forming a knee-jerk coalition government is not the appropriate response.

A second difference that must be addressed is the question of whose right it is to form a coalition government. In Britain, deference was given to the party elected to the greatest number of seats – the Conservatives. Without a majority, David Cameron was given the opportunity to and ultimately did form an alliance, which would effectively have the confidence and majority support of the House.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper may have put it most succinctly when he said, of the British election and coalition, that "Losers don't get to form coalitions." Despite his potential bias against coalitions, Harper was absolutely on point. To use the formation of a coalition as a way to vault two or more parties into power after losing the election is an abuse of the Canadian and Westminster parliamentary system.

Coalition etiquette aside, however, Canadians and other nations around the world who owe their governance history to the British ought to take note of the significance of the British Conservative-Liberal Democrat alliance. Britain has quickly become a country of vast diversity with an increasing number of electoral factions to cater to. Canada, one could argue, has been at that point for decades already. With the emergence of such a diverse political spectrum, has Britain's newfound coalition fame set a precedent for British politics? And, given the natural trickle-down effect between Britain and many of the former Commonwealth nations, will this have implications for Canada and other nations?

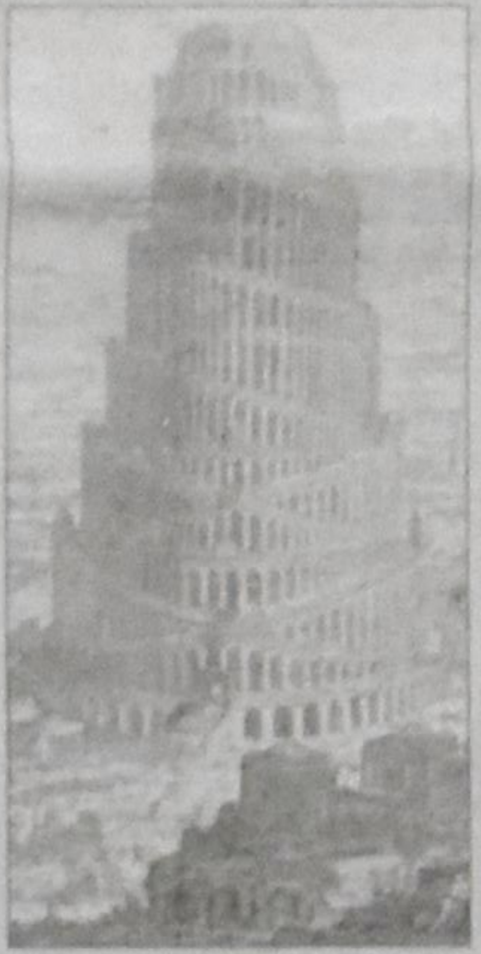
There is much to observe and learn from the British election for Canadians. Ultimately, our parliamentary forefathers have set out the example that a coalition does not have to be a bad thing, so long as it is fashioned in a timely and proper fashion. On a broader scale, it has been a reminder that the root skills and essences of politics – negotiation, cooperation and compromise – are still what ultimately drives the political process. With these in the minds of our elected leaders, politics will continue as a progressive rather than a negative force in our nation.

Brendan Kooy is an Ontario representative for the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC). He currently resides in Chatham, Ontario.

The limits of science: do they exist?

From the Lab
Rudy Eikelboom

Nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Genesis 11:6 NRSV



This Bible verse, part of the Lord's response to the building of the Tower of Babel, suggests that there is no limit to what humans can accomplish. To me as a scientist, this text, like others in our Scriptures, holds both promise and threat. If I look around at our world today, it appears that the implied possibilities of this text are becoming real for us in this age. Scientific progress in the last couple of centuries has given us considerable mastery and understanding of God's creation, and we are knocking at the doors of some fearful aspects of the creation. This progress offers both blessings and disaster in the same hand.

As I write this, news media are announcing that a group of scientists have created an artificial life form. Using a computer program to build a cell's DNA, they have inserted the DNA into a cell from which the natural DNA has been removed; the artificial DNA has "turned on" the cell, causing it to replicate itself – up to a billion times, some news reports suggest. While this is not creation of a new life from scratch, they used existing parts of a natural cell. This comes very close to creating our own new life forms. The template is the DNA God created, but it is a profound step forward in our mastery of life itself, on a level with Dolly the cloned sheep. It is not clear what this development holds for us – whether it be oil-eating cells to fight pollution or cells that cause deadly diseases – but it implies much is now in our reach. If we were to extend this research far enough, could we, if we worked together, defeat death itself?

Nuclear power has a dual nature too. On one hand, the power is "clean" – no direct air pollution and no petro carbon involvement – and it promises lots of power on demand and in a concentrated source. On the other hand, I have to mention just two places, Hiroshima and Chernobyl, and the negative aspects of nuclear power come painfully to mind. The same process that generates useful electricity powers nuclear bombs and resulted in the pollution that lay to waste large parts of Eastern Europe.

Eternal sinful life?

There are a number of issues raised when we link this text with the progress of science. We are learning more and more about God's creation, permitting us to do things that were once only dreams. Smallpox is now only a historical disease. Discoveries have both direct intended and surprising unintended consequences. The laser is 50 years old, but many things made possible through laser technology – such as CDs, the internet, and price codes – were not foreseen when the laser was discovered. We have locked ourselves into a transportation system that depends on individual cars driving single people. The oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico is partially a function of our need for gas and oil.

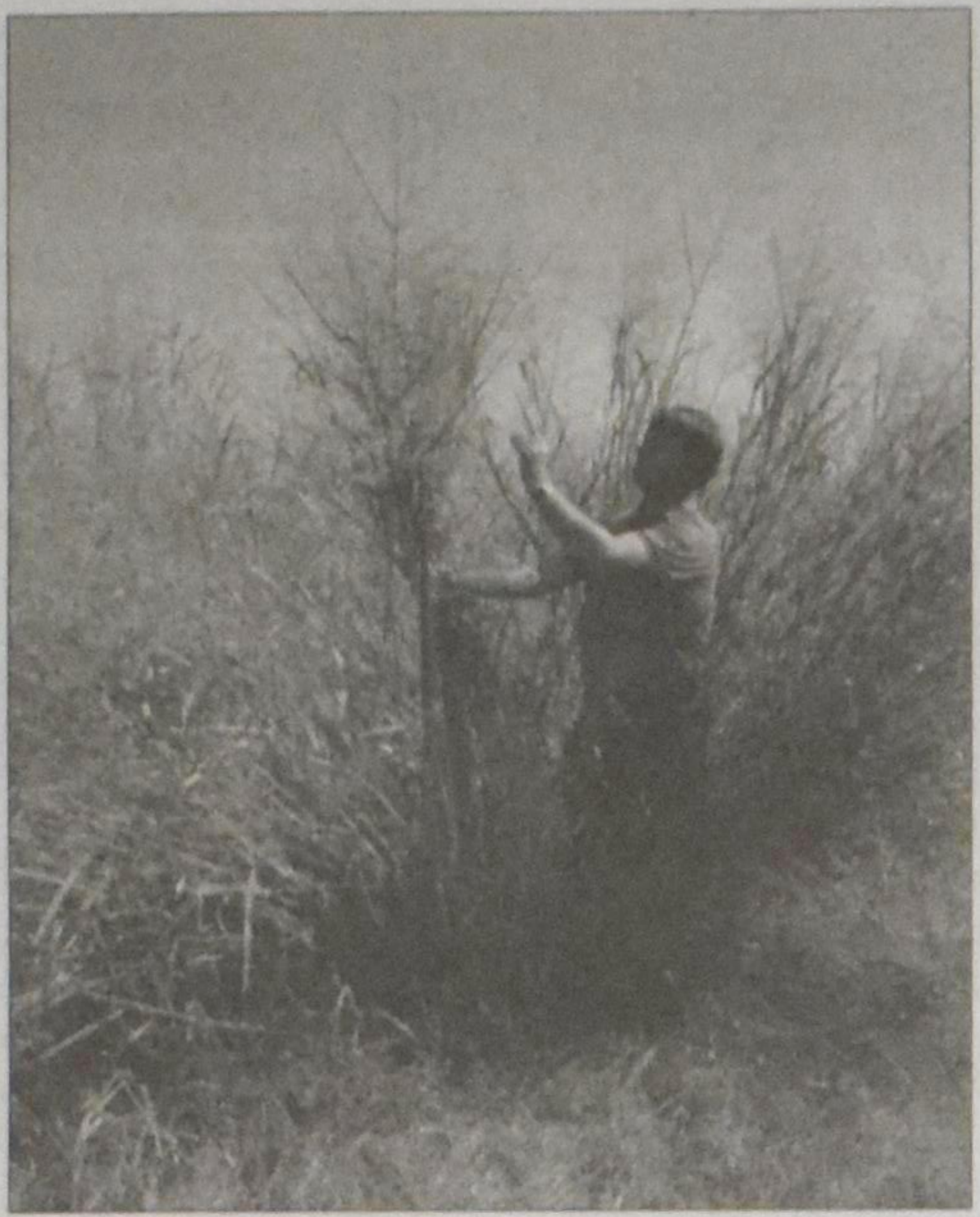
I do not know if the Lord's comment on the Tower of Babel incident lays out a situation that was true only when all people were of one language and of one purpose or if it could forecast the possibility of no limits to what we can do also today. Our inability to work together today may mean that we cannot duplicate what would have been possible if Babel had not been prevented.

In the Tower of Babel story, the people's pride and their refusal to acknowledge God were at the heart of their problem, the reasons God intervened. The action of God to frustrate their plans was intended, I believe, to protect us from ourselves. If we defeated death, we would have to live in this sin-filled, broken creation for a very long time. What is frightening about the promise in this text is how sin and its consequences are still with us today. I am not sure we are wiser than the people of Babel. Pray that God's permanent solution in the gift of his Son, who truly defeated death, may be accepted by all as we increase our understanding of his creation.

Rudy Eikelboom (reikelboom@wlu.ca) is associate professor of psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario.

News

New opportunities exist for Ontario energy crops



Switchgrass is a native of North America, where it has long been used for soil conservation and as a fodder crop. Both in America and Europe it can be found as an ornamental plant. The grass is also found in South America and Africa where it is used as a forage crop. Since the early 1990s the crop has been developed as a model herbaceous energy crop for ethanol and electricity production in the USA and in Canada and it is also being considered as a paper pulp production feedstock. – excerpt from switchgrass.nl .

Nathan Stevens

Our provincial government's decision to move towards a low carbon economy is creating opportunities for Ontario's farmers. There is growing interest among farmers in finding ways to produce energy from the crops that they grow. Although this shift is still in the early stages and the outcomes are uncertain, progress is being made to identify the opportunities and the barriers to growing energy crops in Ontario.

In the big picture, Ontario is moving away from coal use in its energy production mix. While some solar and wind are filling out a portion of the energy supply, they do not play the same role as coal. Coal firing and natural gas burning for electricity helps meet "spur of the moment" spikes. This means that there is an opportunity for biomass to be used as an alternative fuel for existing coal plants today and for a more decentralized power generation system in the future.

The huge change in Ontario's energy policy means that farmers may have the opportunity to grow energy-specific crops. There is considerable research into mycanthus and switchgrass as monoculture energy crops. Alternatively, polyculture systems such as tallgrass prairie are being considered in some circles as a fuel source. Finally, some are looking at residuals such as corn stover as a potential source for energy production. While these crops are unlikely to displace corn or soybeans for most farmers, they may be great options in slightly less productive lands.

There are issues that need to be resolved before this new stream of production can be a viable part of the larger Ontario agriculture picture. The impact that removing corn stover from fields may have on soil health needs to be studied and potentially limited to a safe level. It's also important to study the impact of changing unused land into monoculture land and its impact on biodiversity. Finally, there are regulatory barriers that need to be overcome, such as the Environmental Protection Act's definition of waste and the restrictions that occur because of it.

There are still many questions and concerns that surround the use of agricultural products for energy production. This emerging opportunity has the potential to strengthen the fabric of rural Ontario. But first we must determine if it can be done in an economically and environmentally sustainable fashion.

Nathan Stevens is the Research and Policy Advisor for the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario.

Knight will head Christian business federation

Keith Knight, former editor and publisher of the *Christian Courier*, has, effective July 1, 2010, been appointed the new Executive Director of the Canadian Christian Business Federation (CCBF), an organization formed in 1983 by a group of influential business leaders. He succeeds Hans Vander Stoep, who will retire on June 30, 2010, after leading the organization for 23 years. Vander Stoep took CCBF through times when the viability of CCBF seemed to be in doubt. He has consistently nurtured the development of local chapters and personally attended most of those local meetings.

Knight's appointment was confirmed by CCBF's board of directors at a meeting on May 18. "We are delighted with Keith's appointment," said Jerry Gerritsen, the board chair. "He brings energy and vision to the organization, as well as a long history in communication." He is currently the stated clerk of Classis Huron of the Christian Reformed Church and the chair of council at First CRC in Guelph. He has served on numerous national and international boards, including nine years on the board of the World Association for Christian Communication.

Flowers & Thistles

Curt Gesch

Buy the book, then 'Look a Little Closer'

I was teaching about fungi in a grade 5-6 class when a student blurted out, "You should see my Auntie Myrna's book about mushrooms." Several days later the student brought a collection of Myrna's photographs to school and I was duly impressed. Mushrooms and fungi of every shape, size, and colour: and all photographed "right here" in central B.C. In fact many of them were photographed right on the farm.

Myrna Lieuwen of Topley, B.C. (almost as hard to find on a map as Quick, B.C.) is a wife and mother, a farmer, a devout Christian, and a good photographer. Recently, she published some of her fungus photos and plenty of others in a slim, quality-bound, hard-cover book called *Look a Little Closer*.

Perhaps part of my enthusiasm for this book is its underlying philosophy: One need do no more than peer closely, uncover rocks, check out the backyard field or forest, keep one's eyes open, and the beauty of creation and the care of the Creator will be apparent.

My father quips that, in order to write "Flowers and Thistles," I just look out the window and write about what I see. Precisely. The romantic notion that nature is "out there" far away, that we must see the Rockies, visit the Grand Canyon, or travel to Antarctica to really appreciate our world is misleading, perhaps a contributing factor to ecological and spiritual blindness.

Myrna Lieuwen shows us that spore bodies on common mosses in the yard can compete with anything the wilderness can create. She shows us quiet pools with reflecting light that come from her aspen forest on quite an ordinary beef ranch.

She shows us the ordinary birds – notably ruffed grouse – in breeding display and with young. We might see pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, California quail in our backyards in Vernon, B.C. In New York City, a dedicated group of nature-lovers has tracked the nesting success of red-tailed hawks nesting on apartment buildings bordering Central Park. (Cf., *Red Tails in Love*, or check the Internet).

*****

Long ago, while living near Vancouver, several of us were asked to give workshops to accompany a series of lectures on "The Roots of the Environmental Crisis." I prepared my papers, illustrations and photographs (we still had overhead projectors and slide machines in those days).

Another presenter, my friend Dr. Bart van der Kamp, rode with us in the car to the meeting site in New Westminster. I expected that Bart, a professor of forestry, would have a trunkful of samples of trees and shrubs and flowers, seeds and leaves. Wrong: he had nothing with him. But in the fifteen minutes before his workshop, he collected little scrapings from the cracks in the sidewalk, a twig here and a couple of needles there. To learn about the forest, I learned that day, one looks around, peering into the crevices of the world like – as Virginia Stem Owen calls us – God's spies. If you're willing to consider becoming one of those detectives who spy out God's work, his activity, his care, then get Myrna's book and learn from it.

*****

One other reason I highly recommend *Look a Little Closer* is that the text, while significant, is minimal. The "focus," you might say, is on seeing things, not reading scientific or spiritual essays. Many of the scenes are not identified, which – in my opinion – is as it should be.

Myrna Lieuwen's book, *Look a Little Closer*, leads us to comments like "What's that?" and "Beautiful!" – comments that drive us to study, appreciate, and praise.

Buy the book. Then walk out the door and start looking.

Curt Gesch lives in Quick, B.C., not too far from Topley, B.C. Both places have arrived at about the same level of rural sophistication.

Look a Little Closer: A Photographer Sees God's Handiwork in the Forest, by Myrna Joanne Lieuwen (Crane: Anomalos Publishing House, 2010), is available in stores in central B.C. or from the author at Box 229, Topley BC V0J 2Y0, or *toploons@telus.net*. Also available online at Amazon.ca or STL Distributors.

The bleakest Psalm is really a night-light

Jon Bloom

I read Psalm 88 recently in my devotions, and it filled me with thanksgiving. Which might seem odd. Because this psalm just may be the most bleak of the canonical songs.

Heman the Ezrahite, the apparent composer, was seriously depressed. Maybe he was chronically ill. Or maybe, like many, he battled almost constantly against a relentless darkness. We really don't know. But he said he had been this way since his youth (v. 15). He felt abandoned by God (v. 14), his beloved (v. 18), and companions (v. 8). He was desperate and his prayers seemed to be going unanswered (vv. 13-14). He was so overwhelmed that he felt close to death (vv. 3, 15).

So why did this psalm make me feel so thankful? Simply because God mercifully included it in the Bible. I find that amazing.

This song is a cry for help to a God who seems angry and distant. Admittedly, that doesn't seem very encouraging at first. I mean, if I had consulted God about songwriting and what his hymns should include, I would have taken this one to him and said, "This psalm needs at least a verse or two of some hopeful promise. And, really, the last word of the song shouldn't be 'darkness.' Way too heavy."

But God wisely didn't consult me. He knows there are moments for saints when things look so bleak that all we can do is cry a lament to him. We cry, "Where are you? I know you're there and I know there's light, but I can't see it! Please, please show me!"

I've been there. I've known that kind of darkness. And this Psalm is a gift from God to his children. It's a song for them to sing during the desolate moments, which one day will be swallowed up in unending light.

There are other psalms one should meditate on in such times, like Psalm 27 and Psalm 139. And the Bible as a whole resounds with hope. But Psalm 88 is a merciful reminder from God that the experience of darkness is "common to man" (1 Corinthians 10:13), that when we're in it we are not as alone as we feel, and that he is with us after all.

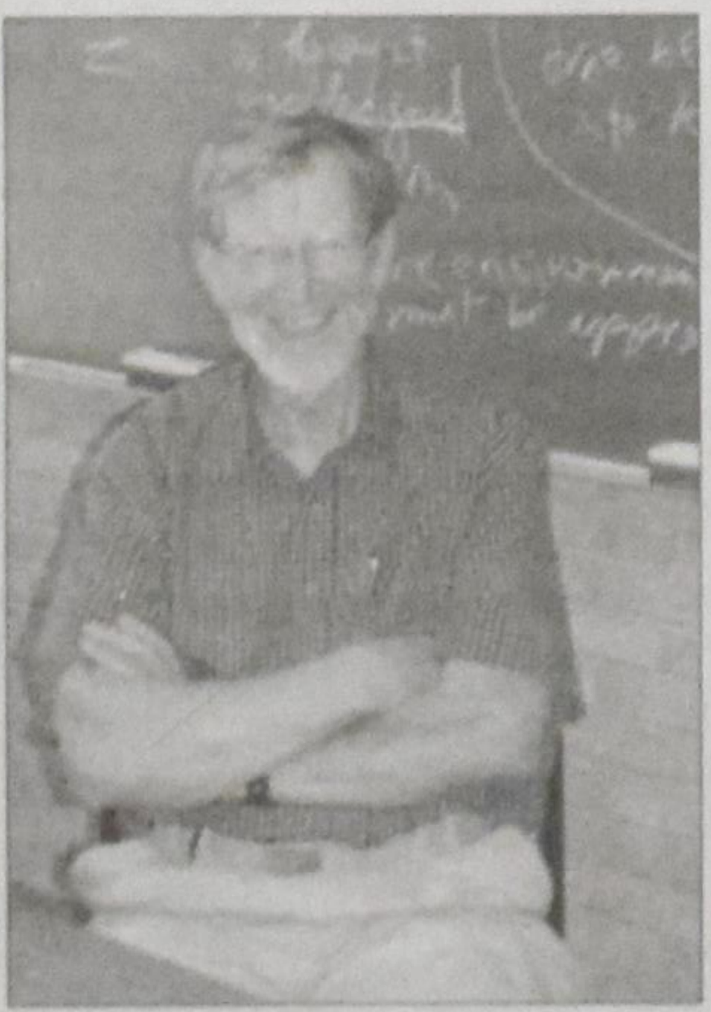
Isn't it just like God to make a bleak psalm a light for those who sit in darkness?

"...Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you" (Psalm 139:12).

Jon Bloom is an associate of John Piper and works for Piper's ministry, Desiring God. Used with permission.

Renowned Reformed philosopher retires

SOUTH BEND, Indiana (CRCNA) – Dr. Alvin Plantinga, a former Calvin College professor of philosophy and a leading figure in the field of the philosophy of religion, was honored recently by a special conference at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, from which he has now retired.



"It's been a tremendous pleasure and privilege for me to be at Notre Dame these last 28 years. I've had the chance to work with some terrific grad students, students who are not only fine philosophers but also wonderful people. I'm proud of them," said Plantinga.

A Calvin College philosophy professor for nearly 20 years before moving to Notre Dame in the early 1980s, Plantinga was honored with a retirement celebration and conference late last month that included presentations from a wide range of scholars, said Michael Rea, director of the Center for the Philosophy of Religion at Notre Dame.

"Alvin Plantinga is one of the most important and influential philosophers of the 20th and early 21st centuries," says Rea. "His publications range over a wide variety of fields, but his most enduring contributions have been in metaphysics, epistemology and, especially, the philosophy of religion.

"Besides introducing important arguments into the literature on the philosophy of religion, however, Plantinga has also played an important role in shaping the way in which many religious philosophers now approach topics in their own fields of specialization," said Rea.

Rea wrote of Plantinga, "Of all the teachers I had the privilege of learning from at Notre Dame, none seemed more effective in the classroom than Plantinga. Furthermore, Plantinga takes his role as a teacher of graduate students very seriously. "I treasure the time I spent working with him and the friendship that grew out of it, and I know that my experience was not unique."

World Anglican leaders suspend U.S. Episcopalians from ecumenical talks

CANTERBURY, UK (CCO/NE) – Early this month the worldwide leadership of the Anglican communion suspended representatives of the Episcopal Church in the U.S. from participating in ecumenical dialogues.

The disciplinary action came after the Episcopal diocese of Los Angeles ordained a lesbian bishop in defiance of a call from Canterbury for a moratorium on such ordinations. (The Archbishop of Canterbury in England is the titular head of the worldwide Anglican Communion.)

In a Pentecost letter Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams said, "I am . . . proposing that, while these tensions remain unresolved, members of such provinces – provinces that have formally, through their Synod or House of Bishops, adopted policies that breach any of the moratoria requested by the Instruments of Communion and recently reaffirmed by the Standing Committee and the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order (IASCUFO) – should not be participants in the ecumenical dialogues in which the Communion is formally engaged. I am further proposing that members of such provinces serving on IASCUFO should for the time being have the status only of consultants rather than full members."

Canon Kenneth Kearon, the secretary-general of the Anglican Communion, also revealed that a letter had been sent to the Anglican primate in Canada, asking whether that province would abide by the appeal of world Anglican leaders for a moratorium on the ordination of openly homosexual bishops.

In May, the Archbishop of Canterbury had suggested taking that action against Anglican provinces which violated the moratorium. He had called for the same disciplinary action against conservative Anglican leaders who intervened in the affairs of other provinces – a reference to prelates from Africa and South America who have encouraged conservative Anglicans in America and Britain to form their own separate communities.

A 'new beginning' for Reformed churches

Charles Honey

GRAND RAPIDS, Michigan – For Maria McDaid, the opening of the Uniting General Council on June 18 culminates nearly a year of excited anticipation. "I was looking forward to meeting people from every part of the world," says McDaid, a 25-year-old UGC steward and Sunday School teacher from London, England. "We're different denominations but we're all Christians. It's a privilege to be here."

Many of the 1,000-plus global church members expected to gather at Calvin College no doubt feel the same, as they prepare to usher in a new era of Reformed church history.

In ceremonies at Van Noord Arena, an estimated 400 delegates will officially form the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) – a worldwide affiliation of 80 million Christians from 108 countries coming together as one body in Christ. A merger of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC), WCRC will nurture fellowship among its 230 denominations and advocate for justice in the world, leaders say. The gathering of the world's largest Reformed Protestant network will continue through June 26.

It marks "a new beginning for Reformed churches around the world," says Setri Nyomi, WARC general secretary, "where Reformed churches say to the rest of the world, 'We are united, we are ready to continue playing the prophetic role that God has called us to as witnesses to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to call people to make a difference in the world.'"

Like all families, WCRC may have disagreements. But members hope their common Christian commitment will fulfill the UGC theme, "unity of the spirit in the bond of peace," while taking firm stands on justice issues.

"I hope that communion and justice can walk hand in hand," says Judi Fisher of the Uniting Church of Australia, WARC's Pacific Region Vice-President. "We have a pivotal moment to offer that kind of loving, caring persona that resonates with the gospel and calls for an end to violence in all its forms."

Over nine days, delegates will deepen their new fellowship with worship and Bible studies while tackling tough issues such as women's rights, economic oppression and environmental degradation. One of the weightier matters will be the Accra Confession, a strongly worded justice statement adopted by WARC in 2004.

"It's not the first step toward a global church as much as it is a recognition that the church is global," says Peter Borgdorff, REC President.

"It's wonderful for a tradition that's usually been known for splitting to say, 'We really can be one,'" says WARC President Clifton Kirkpatrick. "We're entering an era where there's a new sense we belong together in the church of Jesus Christ."

Iraq: New killing fuels fears of anti-Christian campaign

MOSUL, Iraq (AsiaNews) – The execution-style killing of a Christian businessman in Kirkuk, Iraq, has reawakened fears of a systematic campaign against the Christian minority in northern Iraq. Kirkuk, like the nearby city of Mosul, has seen a series of targeted attacks on Christians.

On June 7 the 34-year-old Christian was shot to death. Local sources told AsiaNews, "Christians are once more the target" of attacks. There is an "atmosphere of insecurity." An eyewitness said, "At nine last night Hani Sali Wadi was killed in front of his house." Born in 1976, he was married with a daughter. He owned a mobile phone store in downtown Kirkuk.

At present, it is unclear why he was killed, but Christians fear the community might be in for a new wave of violence. Northern Iraq, especially in Mosul and Kirkuk, has been the scene of targeted attacks against the Christian community for quite some time. The area is in the middle of a power struggle between Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen.

Christians believe they are being persecuted amid an atmosphere of indifference. They are convinced that attackers "are not common criminals" and that behind the attacks "are precise political plans," namely the creation of a Christian enclave on the Nineveh Plains. Both central and provincial governments "are doing nothing to stop it," they say.

Church

Quebec cardinal astounded by uproar over pro-life remarks

MONTREAL (CatholicCulture.org/WCR) – Roman Catholic Cardinal Marc Ouellet has expressed astonishment at the reaction to his statement last month that abortion is a moral crime that cannot be justified even in the case of rape.

Provincial and federal politicians denounced his remarks, culminating in a unanimous resolution in the Quebec National Assembly affirming a "woman's right to free and accessible abortion. "The resolution also demanded the federal government end its ambiguity on the issue and stop de-funding women's organizations.

Also in response, a *La Presse* columnist called him an ayatollah and said he hoped the cardinal would die a slow and painful death, while the National Assembly of Quebec unanimously expressed its support for free access to abortion.

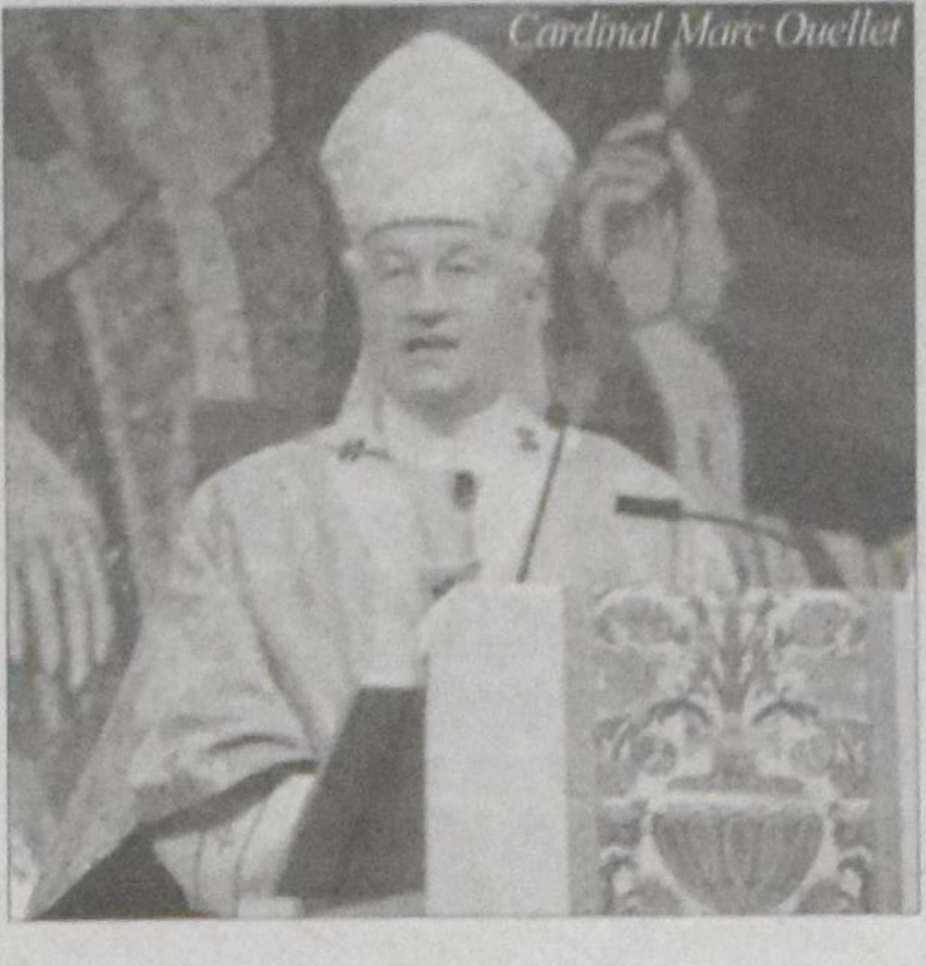
"When it comes to a religious figure or the imposition of a religious doctrine in Quebec, people are going to speak out," said Ainsley Jenicek of the Quebec Federation of Birth Planning.

"Why such a big reaction? Because I am just reminding people of the teaching the church," the cardinal said. He said he is reflecting and consulting on a response. "I will not leave things the way they are. There is a legitimate debate about promoting human life, about respect for the unborn. Our country is very weak on that."

Canadians need to meet Jesus

He continued, "For the unborn, there is not justice. He is the weakest human being; nobody is protecting him. I am aware that in Canada, in Quebec in particular, you will not reform society at the moral level by teaching morals first. It will be through a new evangelization."

That means meeting Jesus. "If you do not meet Jesus Christ, it is very difficult to accept the teaching, the moral teaching of the church," he added. "I am aware of that, even if what we teach is coherent at the rational level." He added, "The Church has to teach the truth of the Gospel and the understanding of the human being from the Gospel of Christ," he said. "And the Church has to care for the formation of conscience."


Cardinal Marc Ouellet

"What I see in the country is the fact that we have for 40 years legalized abortion without any restriction, it has a great effect on conscience," Ouellet said, referring to the role the law plays as teacher. There are about 30,000 abortions a year in Quebec, more than 100,000 in Canada as a whole.

"After these four decades the moral state of our culture, it has become unthinkable to revise the law, it is also symptomatic of the effect of the law on the culture," he said. "In the future we should be more prudent on what kind of laws we pass in Parliament."

Uzbekistan: Church raid by police confiscates materials, sends members to jail

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan (WEA) – The Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance has expressed "serious concern" over developments last month in Uzbekistan. There, a church was raided by police without a warrant, property was seized and eight church members were detained. The church members were subsequently subject to jail terms and heavy fines.

The raid on a Christian church in Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital city, was carried out jointly by regular police, the secret police, the tax inspectorate, fire inspectors and the sanitary-epidemiological service.

The 500 church members, including Sunday school children, were in the midst of the Sunday service when the raid occurred. Police videotaped congregation members and conducted a five-hour search, carried out without a warrant. Among the eight people

detained was the assistant pastor, Artur Avanesyan. The detainees were kept for 24 hours without food or water and were not allowed to contact their families.

Equipment, including computers and printers, as well as Christian literature, was confiscated. Letters of permission given by parents of 392 children to attend Sunday school were among papers taken away by police.

Jail terms, harsh fines

On May 18 the district court sentenced three of the church members to 15 days in prison. Heavy fines were imposed on two members, equivalent of five times the minimum monthly salary (approximately $110 US), and three members were fined almost eighty times the minimum monthly salary (approximately $1,775 US). Other church members expressed shock and dismay at the harsh verdict.

Tashkent City Church of Christ is a registered church which was established in 1999. It has been regularly scrutinized by the Tashkent Justice Department, as required by law. Church leaders expressed their concern that this incident is a clear sign that authorities are trying close down the church permanently.

The raid is the latest in a series of similar raids on Protestant congregations this year. There have also been several instances in which Christian leaders were convicted of various false charges.

The Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance is deeply concerned about the raid and arrests and the apparent deterioration of religious rights in Uzbekistan. "We call upon the government of Uzbekistan to ensure the rights of all Uzbek citizens, and call upon the worldwide Christian community to stand in solidarity with the Uzbek church and pray for justice and equality for the church in Central Asia," said the Alliance.

Disabled British peer urges, 'Don't legalize assisted suicide'

LONDON (TCI) – A leading advocate for disability rights in Britain has spearheaded a campaign urging MPs not to relax the U.K.'s laws on assisted suicide.

Baroness Campbell of Surbiton, who was born with the wasting disease spinal muscular atrophy, has called on politicians to sign a charter declaring that disabled and terminally ill people should receive the same legal protection and support as everyone else.

The charter, part of a campaign called "Not Dead Yet UK's Resistance," also calls on MPs to resist any new attempts to weaken the law on euthanasia or assisted suicide.

Lady Campbell warned, "We face a bleak situation if calls for assisted suicide to be lawful are renewed whilst vital services are being withdrawn or denied." She pointed out that disabled people need help and support to live, not to die. "We cannot allow others to speak for us – especially those who seek to offer us the choice of a premature death: it is not a choice, it is to abandon us," she asserted.

Lady Campbell is a former chairperson of Britain's Disability Rights Commission and head of the all-party disability group. Her comments followed two attempts to change the law in the House of Lords in recent years and an ongoing Bill in Scotland.

The Director of Public Prosecutions for England and Wales, Keir Starmer QC, was forced to issue legal guidance earlier this year, following a case supported by pro-euthanasia campaigners. He announced that prosecutions for assisted suicide may be less likely if the suspect was wholly "motivated by compassion." Starmer reminded people that assisted suicide remains illegal. The guidelines list the factors to be considered when deciding whether a prosecution is "in the public interest."

The only witness will be dead

Dr Peter Saunders of the pro-life group Care Not Killing criticized the guidelines. "Anyone who takes part in an assisted suicide is going to claim they were acting out of compassion. The only witness who really knows will be dead." For example, last month the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) revealed that a man who helped his wife suffocate herself would not be prosecuted for assisting her suicide. The decision increased concern among pro-life groups who fear that assisted suicide is being legalized by the back door.

Mike Judge, head of communications at The Christian Institute, cautioned, "I am not questioning the honesty of this family, but the CPS is in this case relying on their evidence that she had a settled wish to die. It is also the case that people who appear to have a settled wish to die can change their minds." He added, "We are becoming a society where the assessment of your quality of life hinges on what you can do, rather than respect for life itself."

During a debate on assisted suicide in the House of Lords last July, Baroness Campbell made a moving speech appealing to Peers to reject attempts to make it legal to help someone travel overseas to commit suicide. She told of how three years ago doctors had convinced her that her life was at an end and that it was "time for me to go on my way." She warned that many vulnerable patients would face similar pressure if the law were weakened.

Lady Campbell warned the House, "Legalizing premature death as a treatment option plants a seed of doubt about one's right to demand help to live with dignity and undermines the state's responsibility to ensure that all citizens can live with dignity."

She commented on the amendment being debated at the time and said if it were to succeed, "it would place a new and invidious pressure on disabled and terminally ill people who think that they are close to the end of their lives. Some will consider death as preferable to fighting for support to live with dignity. It will be the cheapest, quickest and simplest option. Think of older people who are anxious not to cause their families any distress."

At that time, the House of Lords voted 194 to 141 to reject the amendment but the issue has returned.

Economics

Rediscovering our inner Dutchman

Learning how to be stewardly, not stingy

Jon Dykstra

The Dutch get no respect. For generations the Dutch have been a thrifty bunch that knew where the best bargains where, how to save an extra dollar or two and how to simply make do. And yet, instead of being praised for this admirable sense of thrift, joke after joke has caricatured the Dutch as being cheap: *Have you heard about how copper wire was invented? Two Dutchmen fighting over a penny!*

Unfortunately there is just enough truth to this caricature to make it stick – though they are rare, there is the odd Dutchman who will only cast his bread upon the water if the tide is coming in. These few have lost their way and forgotten the difference between being stewardly and being stingy.

What's worse is that the younger generation – perhaps hoping to shed the shame of the "cheap Dutchman" label – have become spendthrifts. Some have never even seen the inside of a second-hand store, or gotten a paper-cut clipping out coupons. How has it come to this?

There is a need for many to rediscover their inner Dutchman. We need to relearn what our parents and grandparents knew: being thrifty is virtuous, stewardly and even godly. We must also know the difference between being thrifty and being cheap or even downright dishonest.

Downright dishonest

Johan and Charles were having a fine time visiting New York, when they took a wrong turn into a dark alley. Suddenly two large, threatening men jumped out in front of them, and two more jumped out behind them. As the four men closed in, Johan quickly rummaged in his pockets, took something out, and jammed it into Charles' hand.

"Here," Johan whispered, "that's the fifty that I owe you."

Saving money is a virtue – we should never waste what God has given us – but the way some people save money is actually a vice. Young people often "save money" by burning music off their friends' CDs. An older lady thinks she has hit upon a creative way of saving money when she peels off uncanceled stamps from her incoming mail and reuses them. Someone else cuts down on their expenses by getting all their office supplies from work. Another saves several hundred dollars in taxes by declaring personal expense as business expenses.

But a true Dutchman never "saves money" by stealing it from others. That isn't thrift; it's theft!

Cheap

Have you heard about the Dutchman who married a girl born on February the 29th? He did it so he'd only have to buy his wife a birthday present every four years.

I recently came across a story about a "frugal contest" run in the United States. One of the winning entries was sent in by a couple that saved money by cutting out 2-for-1 restaurant coupons, then inviting another couple out and getting these friends to pay full-price so that the two of them could dine for free with the coupon.

That's not thrifty; when you save money at the expense of others, that's cheap (Proverbs 20:14).

The same is true of people who don't tip at restaurants. And of Internet-savvy people who go to their local store, spend 10 or 20 minutes with the salesman there and then, after they have all the information they need, buy the product from an online store where it is cheaper. They've saved money, but by wasting the salesman's time. Another, much more common example in our circles is the person who hires a fellow church member and then expects the fellow to do the work for almost nothing. This is one way to save money, but it's being done at the expense of a brother or sister in the Lord.

So if the last tip you left at a restaurant was, "Don't wear so much makeup dear," you aren't a true Dutchman. You're simply a miser (Proverbs 23:6-7).

Ingenious thrift

Did you hear the one about the poor Dutchman who was going deaf? He needed a hearing aid, but they were just too expensive – he couldn't afford to feed his family and get the hearing aid. So instead he bought a little piece of flex, put one end in his top pocket, and the other in his ear. It didn't help his hearing one bit, but when folks saw it they were always sure to speak up.

A true Dutchman knows that the stewardly way of saving money is an activity worth taking pride in (Proverbs 13:11). It takes ingenuity, brainpower, creativity! Money isn't saved at the expense of others but is instead found by reusing, recycling and re-imagining. In our environmentally conscious society it's clearer than ever why we should rediscover our inner Dutchman.

Examples of this sort of ingenious thrift abound. Some good Dutch folk know that wrapping paper is much cheaper in January, so they stock up then for the coming December. A creative uncle and aunt don't even buy wrapping paper; instead they wrap their presents in old color newspaper comics (their kids love this – they open the present and then get to read the comics too!). Instead of paper towels, reusable cloths (*doekies*) can be used and thrown in the laundry when dirty. Attractive secondhand goods can be had at auctions and thrift stores. In many a Dutch household plastic margarine containers are reused as "Dutch Tupperware." Generic brands at the grocery store are often as good as their name brand competitors, and are much less expensive. True Dutchmen know that the last bit of shampoo can be had by adding a little water to the bottle and swooshing things around. And they know that a Sunday roll is just the right sort of instrument to get the last bit of butter out of the margarine tin.

This is thrift of the best kind.

Conclusion

Our parents' and grandparents' thrift was borne out of necessity – they lived through a war, immigrated to a new country and just didn't have money to spare. Today we have far more money, but that is no reason to waste it. The Dutch virtue of thrift is a heritage we need to pass on to each generation – we all need to learn how to do more with whatever money God has entrusted to us. We need to relearn how to be thrifty… though not cheap. And frugal, but never dishonest. We need to rediscover our inner Dutchman.

And we need to always remember that day-old bread costs half as much and tastes just as good if you pop it in the microwave for only a few seconds.

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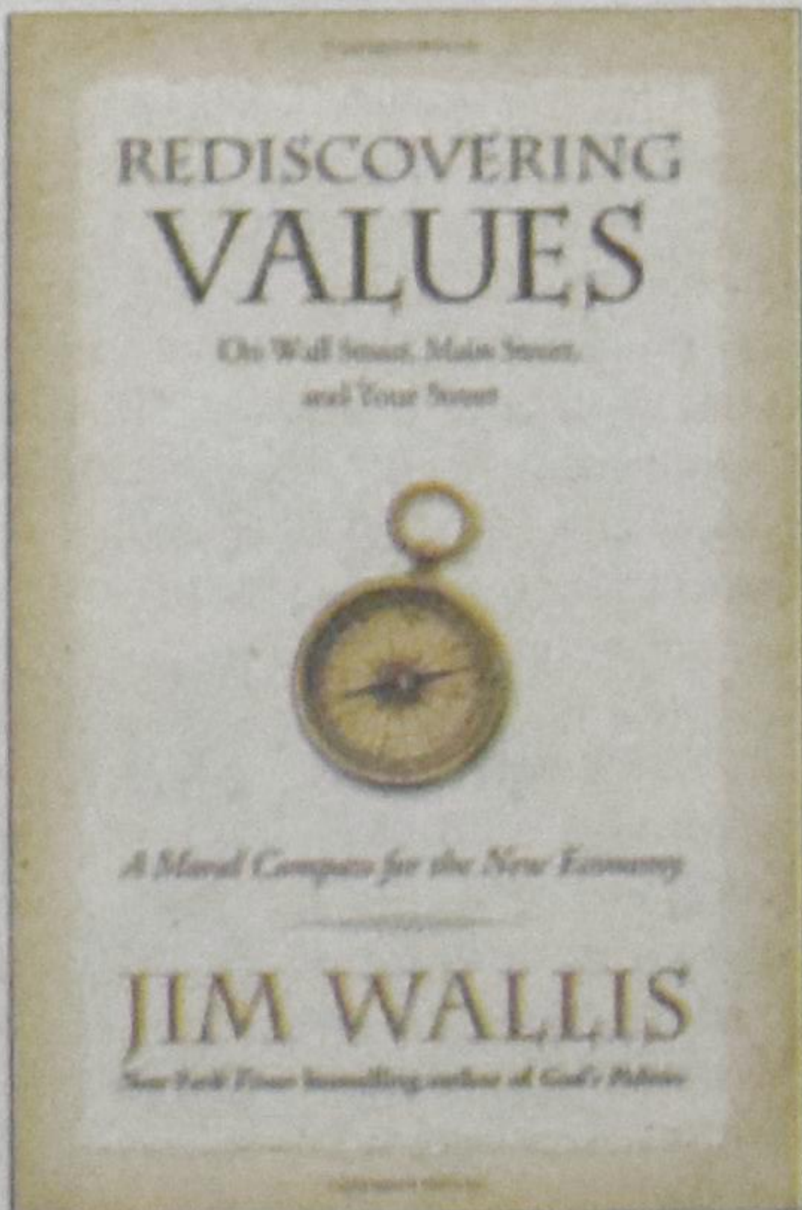
Rediscovering Values: On Wall Street, Main Street, and Your Street

by Jim Wallace (Howard Books, 2010)



Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

In his informative and challenging book, Jim Wallace, CEO of Sojourners and editor in chief of *Sojourners* magazine, points out that "the 2008-2009 economic crisis presents us with an enormous opportunity: to rediscover our values – as people, as families, as communities of faith, and as a nation." What the United States needs, he says, is not just an economic recovery, but a moral one that will transform all segments of society.

Wallace argues that Americans have been asking the wrong questions as they have struggled economically, questions such as "What's the fastest way to make money?" "What do you need to buy next that will make you truly happy?" "When will this crisis be over?"

According to Wallace, the right questions are radically different, questions such as these:"How will this crisis change us? How will it change the ways we think, act, and decide things; how we prioritize and value our success, how we do business, and how we live our lives?"

Both the right and the wrong questions have spiritual roots. The Great Recession is not just an economic crisis, "but it is also a spiritual crisis that calls for new self-regulation."

A spiritual crisis demands a change of heart in order to create a new reality. It involves asking questions about basic values. Wallace says, "The values question lies just beneath the headlines and the media discussion about our severe economic recession. The values conversation is the one begging to be had from Wall Street to Main Street, to the back streets of American life, and to Your Street."

For Christians, a discussion of values always involves understanding biblical teaching. Throughout the book, Wallace explores what the Bible has to say about "money and possessions, wealth and power, credit and responsible financial choices, economic values vs. family values, lifestyle and stewardship, generosity and justice, and both personal and social responsibility."

Foundational to Wallace's critique is his understanding that the Great Recession was caused by idolatrous thinking and practices. He writes, "The story of how we got here is not one of just a few bad apples at the top, a Wall Street conspiracy, or merely some bad public policy. It is, plain and simple, a story as old as humanity: it is a story of idolatry. We have replaced God with the 'invisible hand' of the market, substituted 'market value' for 'moral values' and attributed all that was good and right to the power of the

The wisdom of Solomon

Investment diversification is not new

Charles L. Stanley

Most of us are familiar with the idea of "the wisdom of Solomon." He figured out how to discern the real mother of an infant by threatening to cut the infant in half so each woman could have half an infant. Of course, the real mother said, "Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and by no means put him to death," and her identity was revealed.

Is there such a thing as the "wisdom of Solomon" when it comes to investing? Well, you betcha! And, it has powerful contemporary application.

Here it is: Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 (NIV)

Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.
Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.
If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth.
Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie.
Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.
As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.
Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.

The first principle in verses one and two is diversification to reduce risk.

In Solomon's case, he was referring to sending "bread," the wheat and other grains harvested in Israel, on ships to other ports as trade. Sending grain on a ship was risky, but it was the most efficient way to participate in trade. Take risk, and after many days your profits will come back after the grain is sold.

Now for diversification: "Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land." Interpretation: Do your shipping on several ships, not just one. If a bad storm comes up on the sea your one ship may go down and you will have lost all. (Can anyone spell Enron, Bear-Stearns or Lehman Brothers?) So, spread your shipping across multiple ships and multiple routes and reduce your risk of loss.

Diversification is primarily a way to reduce your risk of loss, not a way to make more profits. However, if you compare the results of a shipper who always spread his risk across several ships versus the merchant who always used only one ship, eventually the diversifier would make more profit. That is because statistically, both will lose a shipment occasionally and the diversifier will only lose part of his crop whereas the non-diversifier will loose 100 percent of that year's crops (like Enron, etc.).

Carry this forward to contemporary equity or stock investing, and the same principles apply. Diversify broadly, and the risk of loss and the risk of volatility of returns are reduced.

If an equity portfolio of three funds is constructed, one with US stocks, one with non-US stocks of companies in mature markets and one with stocks from Emerging Markets, and each of these own virtually every publicly traded stock in their respective markets, then every conceivable risk is diversified away except one – market risk. And, the portfolio would own virtually the entire world stock market. Every time someone buys or sells and makes profit, the portfolio earns a little (very little) piece of that deal.

Principle number two: Risk is everywhere; it cannot be avoided.

If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth.
Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie.

When rain comes, it may be a gentle rain that will increase crops or it may be an old fashioned "gully-washer" and wipe out everything in sight. Farmers have no control over this. They can do their best to apply good agricultural principles in how to plant and how to plow, but some things are simply overcome by the rains.

Nothing in life is free from risk. Regarding investments, there is inflation risk, interest-rate risk, company risk, industry risk, country risk, money-manager risk, currency risk, etc.

Proper diversification can eliminate all of these risks except market risk; that is one risk an investor just can't eliminate.

Principle three: Don't procrastinate because of risk.

Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.

The ancient Near East imagery is the farmer who is always waiting for calm winds before planting seed so it won't get blown away. He will never get around to planting his seed. The farmer who is afraid to begin harvesting for fear the clouds will bring rain and cause his crops to rot in the field will never get around to harvesting his crops – no profit.

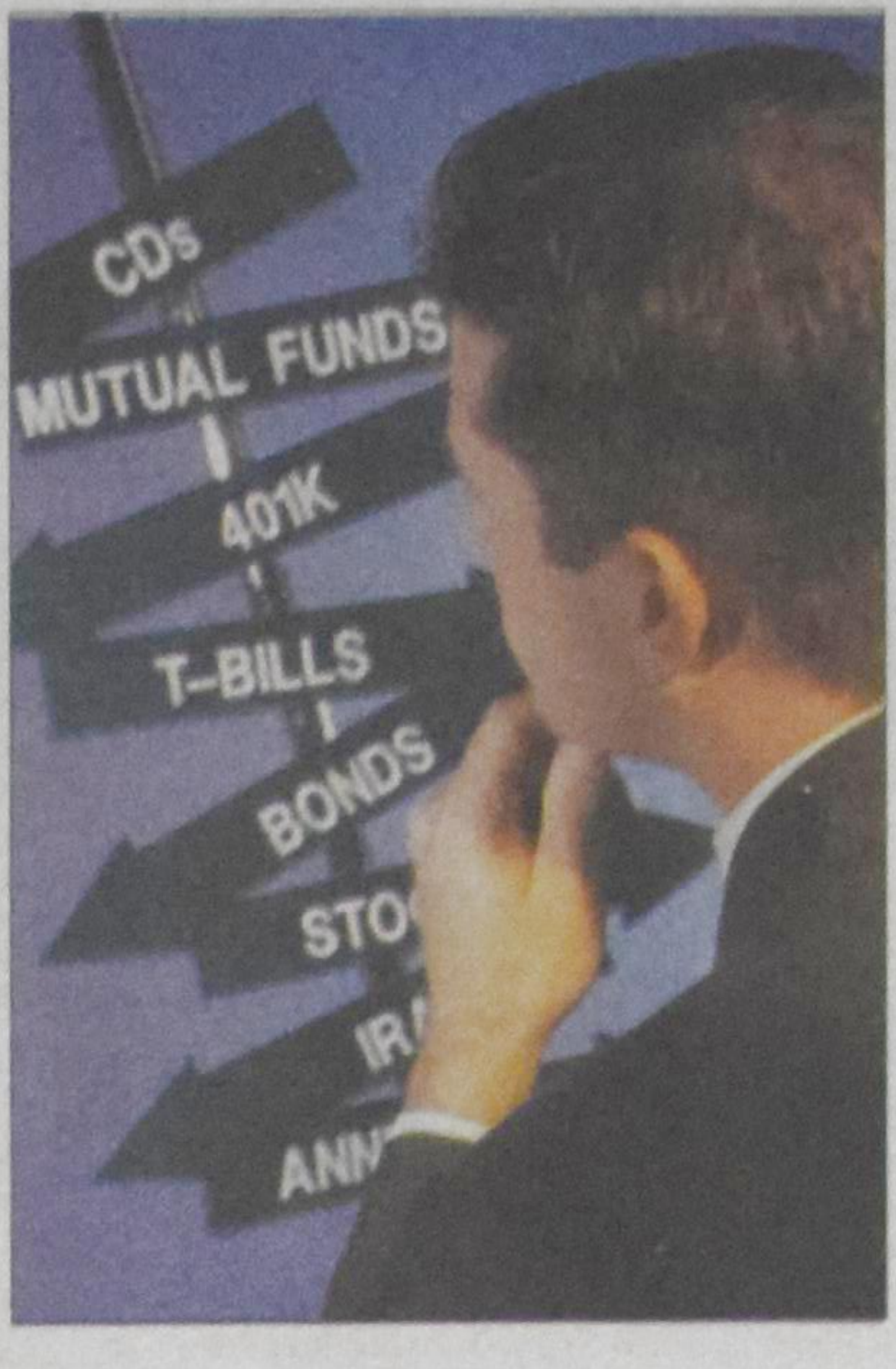
Does it sound familiar? I can't invest because:

* Of the war in Iraq/Afghanistan
* Of the credit crisis
* Of the real estate/mortgage crisis
* Of the failure of Lehman Brothers
* Of the failure of Enron, WorldCom and Tyco
* Of the recession
* Of the George W. Bush administration
* Of the Barak Obama administration
* Of the Republicans being in charge
* Of the Democrats being in charge

History is filled with excuses for not investing and accepting the volatility of the equity markets and yet, since 1926 the U.S. large cap stock market has averaged approximately 10.5 percent per year. If one was willing to accept more volatility risk and invested in small cap stocks instead, the average return was much greater than 10.5 percent.

As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.

The world is complex, and just as we don't understand everything about the development of a child in the womb, we don't understand everything about how God sovereignly oversees the economies of the world and allows for profits to be made fairly consistently over time. If I diversify broadly enough, I don't have to understand the minutiae of the markets to profit from investing in them. I know God has placed in man the desire to produce, to make profit, the desire to do better for himself and for his family, and as long as man has sufficient freedom to pursue those interests, there will be profit, and profit is a good thing.



Principle four: Keep on investing

Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.

The picture here, again, is of a farmer in the ancient Near East. He is encouraged to sow seed all day long, from morning to night, because he doesn't know which seed and which part of his fields will have all the right conditions to produce an excellent crop – or if none of it will. This is another way to approach diversification.

Regardless of the great efforts of our finest young MBAs to research the markets and make the most informed decisions possible, the track record shows that we don't really know which stocks will perform best or if, as over the past couple of years (Dec. 2007 – March 2009), none of the seed will do well. Stock market losses in all markets – U.S., non-U.S. and emerging markets – characterized this last market decline. That was not anticipated, and it is unusual. Some have referred to this as a "Black Swan" event. When looking at a flock of swans, you don't expect to see a black one, but occasionally you will. We did!

So, lets review quickly the Wisdom of Solomon regarding investing.

1. Diversify broadly to reduce risk.
2. Risk is unavoidable. There is no such thing as a risk-free investment.
3. Don't procrastinate because of risk.
4. Keep on investing.

Harry Markowitz received the Nobel Prize in 1990 for his development of Modern Portfolio Theory, but his theory is really just a sophisticated development of what Solomon wrote centuries earlier.

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Rediscovering Values ...continued from p. 10

market to make it so." Wallace encourages readers to "challenge the dominion of the market, by again restoring the rightful worship of God."

He critiques three societal ways of thinking that contributed to the Great Recession – "Greed is good;" "It's all about me;" and "I want it now." He then shows how they harm, rather than help, those who live by these creeds. To counteract these three, he expounds on the truth that enough is enough, we're in this together and we have a responsibility to future generations.

Though Wallace's picture of the Great Recession is bleak and the statistics appalling, his book, nevertheless, is filled with hope as he points to grassroots efforts in the U.S. working for the common good. His final chapter offers twenty moral exercises, concrete choices people can make which can lead to real societal change.

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Column / Review

Words from Wild Horses
Kenny Warkentin

Practicing the presence of God

Finally, brethren,
whatsoever things are true,
whatsoever things are honorable,
whatsoever things are pure,
whatsoever things are lovely,
whatsoever things are of good report;
if there be any virtue and if there be any praise,
think on these things.
Phil 4:8

Throughout this past year I have been struggling off and on with my emotions. I have written about grief and the pain due to the loss of our babies, and in that I have tried to stay focused, yet have realized my own failures as I attempted to try to hold things together. As I reflect on how I handled this season of life, I realize that there was a strong sense of "I" or "my" in my conversations with God, others and myself. I was consumed with my attempts, my failure and a deep desire to try to do it on my own.

One of the tools that Living Waters Ministry tries to instill in others is the discipline of practicing the presence of God. It is not a new thing; rather, it is a practice that has been going on for years. It is something that I often forget in the busyness of the day to day.

When I first heard the notion of practicing the presence of God, my inside thought was, "How do I do that?" I like to keep busy. I like to do things that occupy my time, so that I do not think of anything, especially the struggles that sometimes wage war in my mind and in my desires.

I had learnt to bring things into the light, to surround myself with people who are committed in being my support system, yet there was something lacking. During a ministry moment in Living Waters, I had a few light bulb moments.

One of those moments was that in practicing the presence of God, all I had to do was "just be." That I could be still and quiet in the presence of God, and I didn't have to do anything to be worthy to sit in communion with my Creator. In the sitting, I could hand over the stresses of the day, the human thoughts, the how's the why's the what's and just be there with God in the stillness.

Waiting for peace

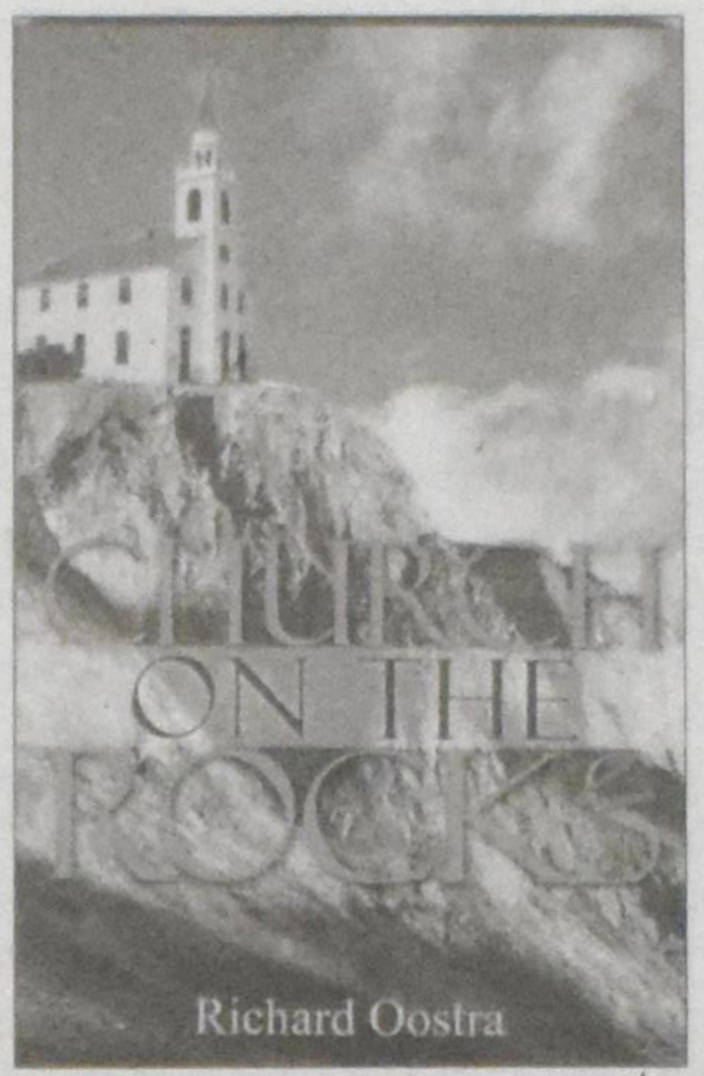
One of my favourite memories of this practice took place five years ago. It was nearing Christmas, and I was alone after having left an eight-year gay relationship and having abandoned my tightly-held gay identity. I was having a particularly hard time, and I chose to sit with God in this hard place, alone in my apartment.

I turned on some music, kneeled, hands stretched out, waiting. I did not have to wait long until I was lying on the floor, wailing for no apparent reason, yet there was a reason. Images flooded my mind. Images of being alone as a teenager, images of my stepping into sin, images of my going against what God had intended for me in regards to my gender and sexuality. I was feeling an overwhelming sense of sorrow for the sin I had done against my Father God. Then came another wave of overwhelming feelings, a sense of deep love. It was a love that I had never felt before, one that came from my Father God – a love that was always there for me and continues to be. I cried for him to just hold me in that moment. Then, there I was kneeling again, this time with an outstretched hand and the warmth of his embrace. Okay, I can't totally explain it, it just happened. I basked in that for a long time. Tears of healing flowed down my cheeks. I felt as if God was crying too. Crying for the pain and the sorrow that I felt, yet, telling me that he had never left me alone and that he promises to continue to journey life with me.

Practicing the presence! Practicing to be still and quiet, when life seems out of control, when temptations are at every doorway – practicing when the desires within get overwhelming is something I am still learning and putting into practice.

I still acknowledge the importance of other disciplines – like having accountability people in your life – but I also know that for me, today, I need to practice being still, and waiting to hear from God. He is always with me and always speaking to me a reminder that I don't have to do anything to gain his love.

Kenny Warkentin (paintpent@mts.net) is an avid blogger, thinker and artist



Church on the Rock(s)

by Richard Oostra
Surrey: Rock Publishing, 2010). 192 pp; $17.95.

Bert den Boggende.

With pseudonymous assistance, Richard Oostra has written an easy to read, cry-of-the-heart book. Generously sprinkled with biblical texts, it essentially deals with what is wrong with the churches and what should be done to correct the situation. Some points are not carefully thought through, others may not be applicable to every denomination or congregation, but there is enough material deserving the reader's attention and further thought.

Oostra argues that the replacement of yesterday's traditional church, while not entirely bad, "has created many legitimate and extremely disturbing concerns." For instance, exegetical preaching has been replaced by telling stories pleasing an audience concerned with self-fulfillment, with the consequence that preaching has become man-centered rather than Christ-centered, that there is often an absence of the exaltation of Christ, that it is culture-driven, that there is an emphasis on emotion, and that many pastors use "unbiblical methods to maintain the church as well as their careers." All too often churches have used earthly marketing methods, creating commercialized religion, turning pastors into CEOs and transforming worship into entertainment. There is indeed a danger that stories become man-centered; nevertheless, Jesus' frequent use of stories – and rarely exegeting them – indicates that story telling as such is not an unbiblical method.

The singing of old familiar and doctrinally rich hymns, Oostra laments, has given way to "reciting empty repetitive choruses." Instead of Christ-centered music congregations have turned to performing music of contemporary culture, music that only stirs up emotions. While I sympathize with his laments, the church frequently made use of contemporary music, for instance Sullivan's tune for "Onward, Christian Soldiers." Oostra may lament the stirring up of emotions, but Christianity involves the whole person, including the emotions. Oostra fails to distinguish between emotion and emotionalism; the latter, it seems to me, has no place in a church service.

The point ties in with Oostra's comments that there is a serious lack of sensitivity to the concerns of the elderly. He poignantly asks why the elderly suddenly should accept new forms of service. Even stronger, he asks, "How dare we walk over the elderly and offend them?" While I think the point is well-taken, the implication may be that the elderly are fixed on tradition and ignore the needs of younger folk.

While Oostra deals separately with the issues of laity, professional clergy and elders, the three are closely connected. His brief historical survey of the growth of the professional clergy and the concomitant formation of laity is too simplistic, but the main idea is right. Clergy have become so dominant that the rest of the membership is inactive, stagnant and reduced to listeners and supporters. This clergy dominance, he argues, is not biblical since Scripture supports the concept of a plurality of leadership: early church leaders always worked in teams, thus contributing to checks and balances. All too often elders are now members of a corporate board. Oostra calls for a return to the biblical requirements of elders – he provides an extensive list of those requirements – because elders were meant to be the key safeguards of the church and the key to ministry leadership. Moreover, frequently a church moved from serving as a house of prayer to being a community center, yet a service was not meant to be a gathering to hear a lecture, but an equipping event. While he still sees some value in a regular church service, he promotes house churches and small groups, which motivate active involvement in which spiritual gifts can be exercised and genuine love and fellowship can be experienced, and through which sacrificial servanthood can be practised. These models, he suggests, would make members more mission-conscious and make them realize that they are ministers of reconciliation. Presently ministers are not developing a school of prophets, pastors or evangelists. It is clear that Oostra advocates the undoing of the clergy's dominance, the restoration of biblical eldership and the abolition of passive church membership.

Oostra posits that newcomers are not always welcomed; they remain outsiders. Once after a church service I introduced myself to the minister, indicating that I wanted to transfer my membership. "Oh," he said, "then you have to talk to the clerk" and away he walked! If the church is a family, it is all too often a dysfunctional family. Oostra rightly points to the early church as a model and all too often the church in the 21st century does not come close to that model. I wonder if this may be one of the reasons why young people leave the church when they move to another place.

Potential members are often turned away because many churches have a myriad of rules, regulations, restrictions and reservations while focusing on adherence of narrow interpretations. Who, Oostra wonders, has given a church the right to make such secondary, man-made requirements for membership? Jesus never asked his followers to join an organization but rather to follow him. "Does the Bible make a distinction between being committed attendees or church members when both belong to Christ?" Rather, we should adhere to the dictum "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."

In his call for further reformation he suggests better church discipline, renewing Christ's standard of salvation and greater outreach. While he counsels members of dead congregations to leave, I would prefer his second option: to fight. Many CRC members will find the absence in Oostra's book of the cultural mandate and the rejection of women in office troubling.

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Reformed Thought

blog: (n) short for weblog, a website containing an online journal with reflections, comments and links.
Christian Courier *gives you a glimpse into current Reformed thinking by presenting excerpts from some of today's top blogs. Blogs are usually free-association, occasional, off-the-cuff and may not conform to the standards of print publications.*

THE GOSPEL COALITION

Since the founding of The Gospel Coalition in 2005, churches and individuals have asked how they can join. The Network is our attempt to allow others to be more personally involved in our efforts to promote gospel-centered ministry. There are several ways to be a part of the Network, and there is never a cost for any service. Learn more about our rationale and methodology behind TGC Network at http://thegospelcoalition.org/network/.

http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc

June 10, 2010

Love Never Ceases

Paul argues for the priority of love over gifts by stating that while prophesies will pass away and tongues will cease and knowledge will pass away, love never will. Love is enduring; it is permanent. Why such an emphasis on love? To be sure, Paul does not discard gifts; he urges the pursuit of the higher gifts (1 Corinthians 12:31, 14:1). Nevertheless, we are to pursue love as THE more excellent way.

The Origin and Source of Love

If we are to understand love we must begin with God for God is love (1 John 4:8). If we begin with the world's understanding of love, we will only dwell in the erotic. However, when we begin with God, we see that to say God is love is not merely to say that God is loving; it is to say that love is the essence of God's being (Leon Morris, Testaments of Love, 36).

Most clearly, it is through the lens of the cross that we may understand God's love (Romans 5:8). When we see God's love through the lens of the cross, then we can see that . . .

God's love never ceases; it is eternal.

The Father loved the Son before the foundation of the world (John 17:24). In other words, God has always loved; this is evident in the relations within the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There has always been love shared within the God-head.

This is the love that God shares with us. We were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4; see also Romans 8:28-30).

God's love is undeserved; it is unconditional.

This love that God shares with us is undeserved because we are sinners by nature who deserve God's wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3). God does not love us because of something attractive in us (see Ezekiel 16; Hosea). God loves sinners because it is His nature to love (Morris, 142).

But God's love is holy; God does not rejoice in unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth.

Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13:6, that love does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. This is because love is holy and righteous just as God is holy and righteous – after all, God is light (1 John 1:5). We have a sin problem that makes us unlovable (1 Corinthians 6:9-10); the solution is Christ (1 Corinthians 6:11). Here we see the selfless love of God – looking outward to others.

Therefore, God's love is most clearly seen at the cross of Christ.

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:9-10).

The love of God is most clearly displayed at the cross because it is here that we see the eternal, selfless, holy love of God as the Father pours forth His wrath on the sinless Son in order that sinners may have everlasting life (John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

Love is THE way of the Christian because it is THE way of the Triune God.

If we say we are God's, that we belong to God, then we will walk in the same way in which He walked (1 John 2:3-6). This is the message that has always been, even from the very beginning: love one another (1 John 3:11-15). The basis for this love for others is Christ.

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers (1 John 3:16).

It is this love that is permanent, never-ceasing, for it is God's love poured into our hearts.

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Romans 5:5).

Let us, therefore, pursue love – let us love one another!

posted by Juan Sanchez

June 4, 2010

Losing Our Perfect Games

If you are a Major League pitcher, you dream about pitching in the World Series, winning the Cy Young, or pitching a perfect game. That's the pinnacle of your career. That's your ticket to the history books; perhaps even to the Hall of Fame.

If you follow baseball at all, or if you witnessed Detroit radio host Paul Edwards' (@GodandCulture) near heart-attack on Twitter on Wednesday night, you now know the names Jim Joyce and Armando Galarraga. Galarraga, a pitcher for the Detroit Tigers, threw a perfect game this week in front of a home crowd. The only problem was that Joyce, a 22-year veteran umpire, blew a ninth inning, 2-out call at first base, robbing Galarraga of his place in the history books.

Galarraga reached his pinnacle and had the ground drop out beneath him. How did he respond? By shouting (a baseball pastime)? By pouting (a pro athlete pastime)? No, he simply smiled. A smile that said: "You sure about that? OK, that's OK."

We all have these pinnacles.

Writers may long to be on the New York Times Bestseller's List. Pastors may long to build a megachurch or make the national conference circuit. Businessmen or businesswomen may long for the C-level position. Bloggers may long for that one web-changing, viral post. We ply our trades, hoping for the big break that may or may not come, believing that our lives will count for something more if our break does happen.

These pinnacles aren't good or evil in and of themselves. But the longing is what proves dangerous. The longing is the pathway to many snares that keep us from keeping God at the center of our lives.

Through this weekend, you'll hear media members use words like "grace" to describe Galarraga's response to a bum deal. And he was gracious in his reaction; he went back to the mound and got the next batter out, headed to the locker room without a complaint, and acknowledged to reporters that people make mistakes sometimes.

We could argue whether or not this is actually grace. But grace isn't what struck me in this instance. The picture I'll remember from that night in Detroit is a look on a man's face that said the pinnacle was a mirage.

I don't know Galarraga or his motivations, so I won't put words in his mouth or ideas in his head. But I will take the steadfastness of his countenance and hold it up as an emblem of contentment in the midst of great disappointment, and say this is an image we should cultivate in our spirits. This kind of contentment believes that life is a vapor, that we are to be anxious about nothing because our Father owns everything, and that our God is sovereign over the levity of abundance and the thickness of grief in our lives.

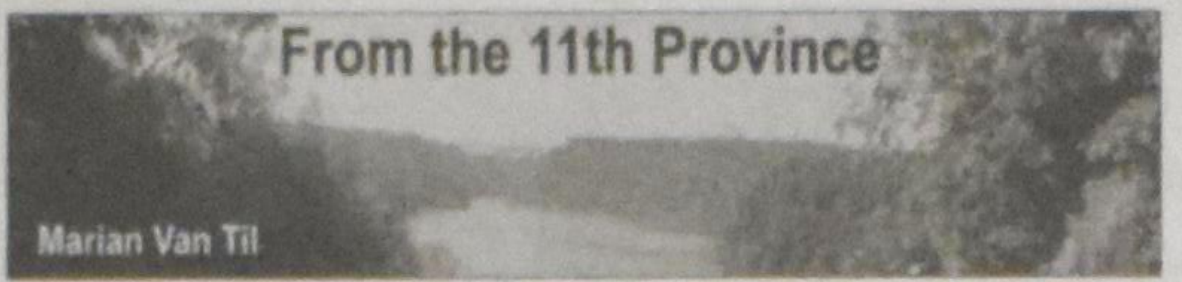
What happens when the transmission falls out of our car on the highway and our checking account is floating just north of zero? What happens when we don't get the promotion we thought we needed or the job we thought we deserved? What happens when our dreams for our lives don't actually come true?

Do we shout at God in prayer? Do we spiritually pout in our own subtle ways? Do we ponder what could have been, or what may be, rather than living out of the reality of the gospel in the midst of our daily lives?

May we all lose our perfect games and find that they were a mirage in the first place. May we look at the greatest success we can imagine on earth and count it loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus. And may we lay our greatest hopes and dreams at the feet of the cross, gazing upon the steadfast countenance of our risen Savior, and join the psalmist in saying, "Whom have I in heaven but you? There is nothing on earth that I desire besides you" (Psalm 73:25). It is then we lose our perfect game and gain our greatest treasure.

posted by Chris Tomlinson

Our world



A spring-time of life – and death

My roses, in gradated shades of yellow, pink, red and orange, are blooming profusely; except for, ironically, my Princess Marguerite climber. So far it has produced just two deliciously orange-tangerine flowers, a colour symbolic of the Dutch House of Orange.

This is the time when one of my spirea is re-covered with peculiarly bright lavender flower clusters, and when the leaves of a later-blooming spirea have taken on a yellowy-lime glow. There are tiny fruits on my two dwarf peach trees and ripening cherries on another pair of dwarf trees. My herb garden is flourishing, my green beans are up, my heirloom tomatoes are flowering; even my hot-weather-loving peppers are thriving. And the potted catnip is ready for sampling by the felines, much to their delight.

Despite such beauty and new growth, disease, blight and death lurk on this fallen world. Deadly peach-leaf curl is leaving its mark. Sea gulls attempt to make off with the goldfish in our small pond. A visiting bullfrog eats song birds. The robin's nest outside our deck door holds just two scrawny chicks. Were other eggs sucked up by some predator?

Inside, we have five lively felines. One is an engaging yearling we've had for only a week. But a sixth cat is not lively; she is, in fact, dying. She has bone cancer: a large, inoperable tumor, fatigue, and recently an aversion to food. A few days ago Hedwig declined sharply and we made the hard decision that the following morning would be her last. Cats are masters at hiding their distress, but a cat that won't eat quickly develops liver problems. I say this matter-of-factly, but as any animal lover knows, owning the power of life and death over a much-cared-for pet causes anguish and second-guessing. I dread it (we've faced it five times before, two of those last year within a span of seven weeks). But on this day it would have been worse: I would have had to face the ordeal alone, as my husband had meetings that couldn't be put off.

Angry at 'fate' or God?

It is now a few days later and Hedwig is still with us. She has had a renewal. She is eating again (enticed by her favorite foods), has resumed purring audibly when I pet her and her eyes have brightened. She has gotten a reprieve for now and is getting the chance to try a more potent version of the immune-boosting drug she takes.

When we thought Hedwig's time was up, I called "Susan," the expert Save-A-Pet cat-fosterer from whom we adopted Hedwig last summer, and who still has a keen interest in this shy, endearing animal. Susan is distraught, yes angry, that a young abused cat – one that had already suffered much in her short three years before adoption – should now have to suffer the painful debilitation of a terminal illness.

Susan is an educated, compassionate woman who devotes her free time to rescuing needy cats. Sadly, she is not a Christian. She appears to believe that "fate" dealt this nasty blow to our reserved but affectionate Hedwig; or possibly it came from an unfair, heavy-handed God. Susan knows I'm a Christian, but in our phone call we didn't discuss ultimate reasons for Hedwig's illness. Later I thought that we *should* have. I wasn't a particularly good witness to Susan. As I wrote last month about God's intense involvement in everything in his creation, a biblical Christian has to believe that God sees cats as well as sparrows fall, and cares. I don't understand his purpose in it but I know that he's got the animals, too, in his hands, and that he loves them because he made them. But I didn't say so.

Wicked Susan?

Meanwhile, Ed and I must take the best possible care of Hedwig and all the cats (and fish, birds and plants) that God – whatever his purposes – has put in our path. "A righeous man cares for the needs of his animal," says Proverbs 12:10.

That Proverbs verse ends with a perplexing "but." "But the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel." Are Susan's many kindnesses to living, breathing feline God-creations that other people have literally thrown away really "cruel" because she *is* an unbeliever (Scripture's definition of "the wicked")? I suspect it means that in an ultimate sense we're either for God or against him. You either live for him – and then he sanctifies all your works – or you don't. And you must answer to him for why not.

That's another reason I shouldn't have missed the opportunity to confess to Susan that Hedwig and all life (well or ill) is in God's hands. If I get another opportunity I pray I won't blow it again.

Marian Van Til is a former C.C. editor who lives in Youngstown, NY, with her husband and five cats. Her book about life with cats, Confessions of a Cataholic, *was released on Reformation Day. For a signed copy see < www.WordPowerPublishing.com> or write Marian at mvantil@roadrunner.com, or call 716-745-7073.*

Lament for planet earth

The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt.

Isaiah 24: 5,6

Today these words are truer than ever. Just as Chernobyl was a horrendous man-made nuclear disaster so the Gulf of Mexico calamity is a man-made oil disaster of similar magnitude, doing as much damage in days what global warming has been doing in decades. We, who drive cars, heat houses and use electricity, bear equal responsibility with BP.

"We have broken the everlasting covenant." In Genesis 9 God made a covenant with us. A covenant is a contract through which two parties pledge troth, just as in a marriage. 1 Samuel 18:3 describes such a procedure. There David and Jonathan take over each other's possessions, symbolized by exchanging their clothes and weapons. They also mingle blood, by cutting a small insertion in their arms and touching these wounds so that the blood flows together. And then, as a sign of this covenant, slightly infect them, so that scars remain. Jesus, head of the New Covenant, did exactly the same when he sealed the covenant with his blood, his wounds still visible on his hands today.

In the Genesis covenant God gave everything he had – the entire earth and the heavens – to humanity, on the condition that we give ourselves to God, as described in Mark 12:30, "Love the Lord with heart, soul, mind." It's exactly that covenant that we have discarded. I don't have to elaborate, as the brokenness of society and nature is all too evident everywhere. It is plain that this Covenant goes far beyond Bible, Christian school and church attendance.

Reduce the sinning

The saying goes that "The Future belongs to those who prepare for it today," which is especially true for Christians, because they know their future: the renewed creation. With that in mind, the real challenge facing Christians today is genuinely lamenting the state of planet earth, and attempting to prepare for life in the new earthly Creation. That's why we have to minimize "sinning against the earth, which is now the most dreadful thing," to quote Nietzsche, who, when he saw a horse whipped to death by a drunken owner, lost his mind, so affected was he by animal cruelty.

How can we minimize "sinning against the earth," and maximize preparing for eternity? A little detour first. Basically there are three distinct economies: the primary economy – the natural world of soil, seas, and forests; the secondary economy – producing goods and services by our labor; the tertiary economy – the fabrication and exchange of money.

The problem we face is that the natural primary economy has essentially no place in current economic policy. Our capitalistic system assumes that soil, seas, forests will always be there to provide the secondary and tertiary economies with our wants. So the plight of planet earth is ignored. The Gulf of Mexico and its wetlands is just the latest casualty of our ignorance.

Enormous cost

The Gulf disaster: it makes me cry. This area is incredibly rich in nutrients and diversity. Each day in season sees 25 million birds land to replenish their diminished stamina. *All* 110 neo-tropical migratory songbird species rely on these coastland bird refuges with their vast marshes and miles and miles of beaches. Imagine: the just-born birds being fed tainted fish or abandoned because their parents have drowned in oily muck: these once life-giving swamps and bogs are in danger of becoming the Louisiana killing fields.

Raj Patel in his book *The Value of Nothing* writes that we know exactly the price of everything – the tertiary economy – but the value of nothing. We don't value the water, the air, the soil or the birds. He notes that if we take all these primary-economy costs – pollution, transportation, carbon foot print – into consideration, a hamburger should cost $200.00.

"Therefore a curse consumes the earth," so evident in the Gulf of Mexico, where we just have destroyed the jobs of tens of thousands of fishermen, the lives of millions of birds, and made the waters there useless for life, so that we can drive that mile to the store in air-conditioned comfort, taking God's name in vain in the process, oblivious to the plight of Planet Earth.

Bert Hielema (bert@hielema.ca) relocated from suburban St Catharines in 1975 to rural Tweed. His writings can be found at "hielema.ca."

Pastors ponder change

James C. Dekker

How many pastors does it take to change a Christian Reformed church? The best and right answer is probably "None." That hasn't kept many of my ilk from trying. Some try wisely, some foolishly. Most change-driving pastors take and give lumps in the process. Some lumps are well-deserved, others not. Saddest are times when lumps permanently wound pastors, their families and congregations.

Recently I asked colleagues about change in churches. These women and men, in Canada and the US, are pastors in churches large and small, of young church plants, of long-established churches. I know a few colleagues well, others hardly at all. Most have participated in Peer Learning Groups sponsored by Sustaining Pastoral Excellence – fine, safe places of mutual discipline and spiritual sharpening.

Their responses showed unmistakable convergences, without being cookie-cutter answers. Maybe we're all reading the same books, filling in blanks with our experiences seen through similar cultural lenses. This isn't science; it's story. I pray this story reflects God's Bible story of change that follows the stirring plot of creation, fall and redemption.

Living organisms change

Pastors Joan De Vries (Burlington, ON), Ken Vander Horst (Grand Junction, CO) and Karen Wilk (Edmonton, AB) all agreed the church must change in response to changes within itself and in its environment. All described the church as a "living organism." Karen claims, "Living things are dynamic. If not, they're dying." In unsurprising, albeit earthy Canadian fashion, Ken added, "The church is like a living body. Imagine a human body never changing – all that stuff piling up inside!"

Several pastors sang harmonies about healthy and unhealthy change. Joan De Vries noted that "a 'mall mentality' of shopping for the best deal took hold [in the 90s]. Members began to move freely among church options." Her congregation couldn't count on old patterns of loyalty to keep the church alive. So as pastor she encouraged conversations about such trends and helped the congregation become "intentionally outreaching."

Over several years the congregation made many changes, large and small. "We built a new church, chose a new name. We trained greeters, reformatted bulletin layout and content, set up prayer walks in our new neighbourhood. We tried hard to avoid in-house acronyms – all to become as welcoming as possible."

Al Gelder, pastor of Binghamton, New York's Valley CRC since 1994, recounted the largely happy process of change from all traditional music to an intentional traditional and contemporary blend. "We introduced changes carefully. We had competent, caring younger musicians – a wonderful drummer who accompanied, not blasted. One youth worker picked up guitar on his own, but did it well. The organist still hears the compliment, 'We sure miss you when you're on vacation.' We continue to receive young families, partly because of worship style. The older group sees the need to use younger generations' music for the church's future."

Describing her experience as a member of Sherman Street CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, hospital chaplain Erika Dekker observed, "One difficult change our congregation faced was cutting staff positions because of budget shortages. Although this was a painful experience, two years later we realize by doing that we dodged a tendency towards professionalization, particularly in preparing and leading worship. Now we relish the involvement of many and diverse people in worship."

Erika advised, "Whenever there is change, leaders must constantly communicate with the congregation. Our Council does this by anticipating upcoming significant decisions and then holding a town hall meeting. Although Council makes the final decision, the congregation is involved and honoured throughout the process."

Al Gelder dittoed the wisdom of such processes. Valley Church successfully navigated the shoals around women-in-office after hosting careful forums and taking an advisory vote. Soon the church was blessed with a highly competent and respected woman elder.

Even careful changes flounder

Not all changes sail smooth seas. For years one church owned no flag. A seniors' community group using the building wondered why they had to provide their own flag for the Pledge of Allegiance. Council accepted a World War II veteran's offer to buy a flag, developing a policy why the flag would be kept in the fellowship hall and not the sanctuary.

Occasionally the flag was moved to the foyer for Memorial or Veterans' Day observances, where it stayed for a while. Someone moved it back to the fellowship hall, saying that was "policy." Smelling trouble, Council reviewed the policy and asked two military veterans to explain reasons for not displaying the flag permanently in the sanctuary; it could be brought in for council-approved occasions.

Two families opposed to flag display noticeably decreased their involvement. Two other families, including the flag donor, left because they could not belong to a church wishy-washy on patriotism. Oddly, one man had worshipped for more than ten years without a flag in the sanctuary. Now he says, "I really can't worship God if the American flag isn't in view." The baffled pastor commented, "This change was very painful. Although we twice articulated our position, rational arguments don't come near answering emotional feelings."

Fostering healthy change

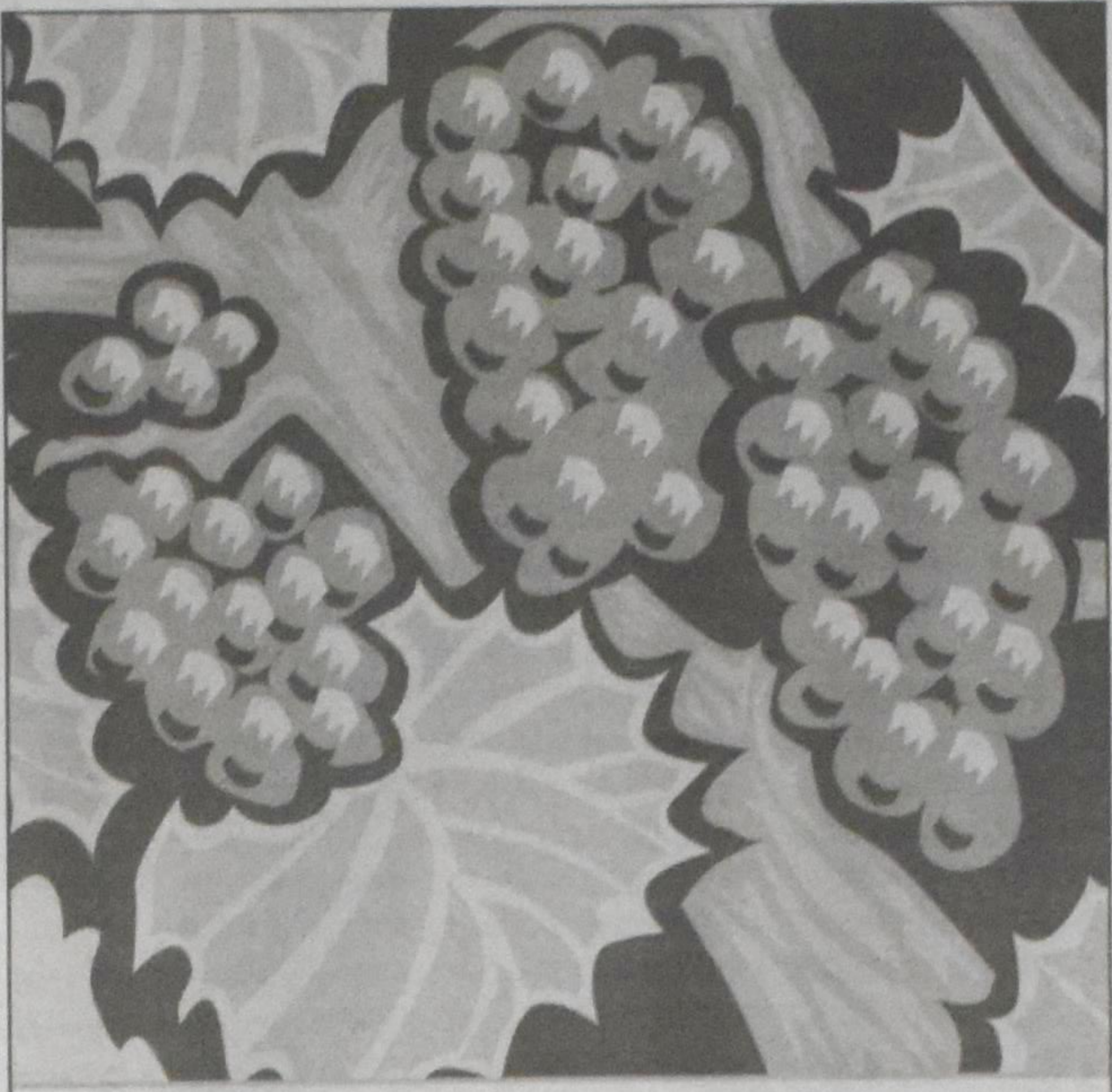
Ken Benjamins of Hope CRC in Brantford, Ontario clearly sketched criteria for healthy change: "It's okay if change can be defended by Scripture, the Reformed Confessions, Church Order [the Christian Reformed Church's virtual legal constitution] and synodical guidelines. No change should go past a congregation's stretching ability. Stretches past the comfort zone need patient, wise explanations and require mutual trust that we must not abuse." Ken claimed that such orderly changes even let him sleep well! (Maybe he's right. Too many people say Church Order puts them to sleep.)

Benjamins also said that pastoring through change demands careful, behind-the-scenes work. He promotes unity, urges Council to own changes. "After all, getting people to change – from sinners to saints – is what we do for a living!"

The price of change

All change comes with a price, though. De Vries and Benjamins agreed that pastors can become scapegoats of change gone sour. Joan wisely noted, "For change to go well, pastors must preach deliberately about faith versus fear,

Continued on p. 17



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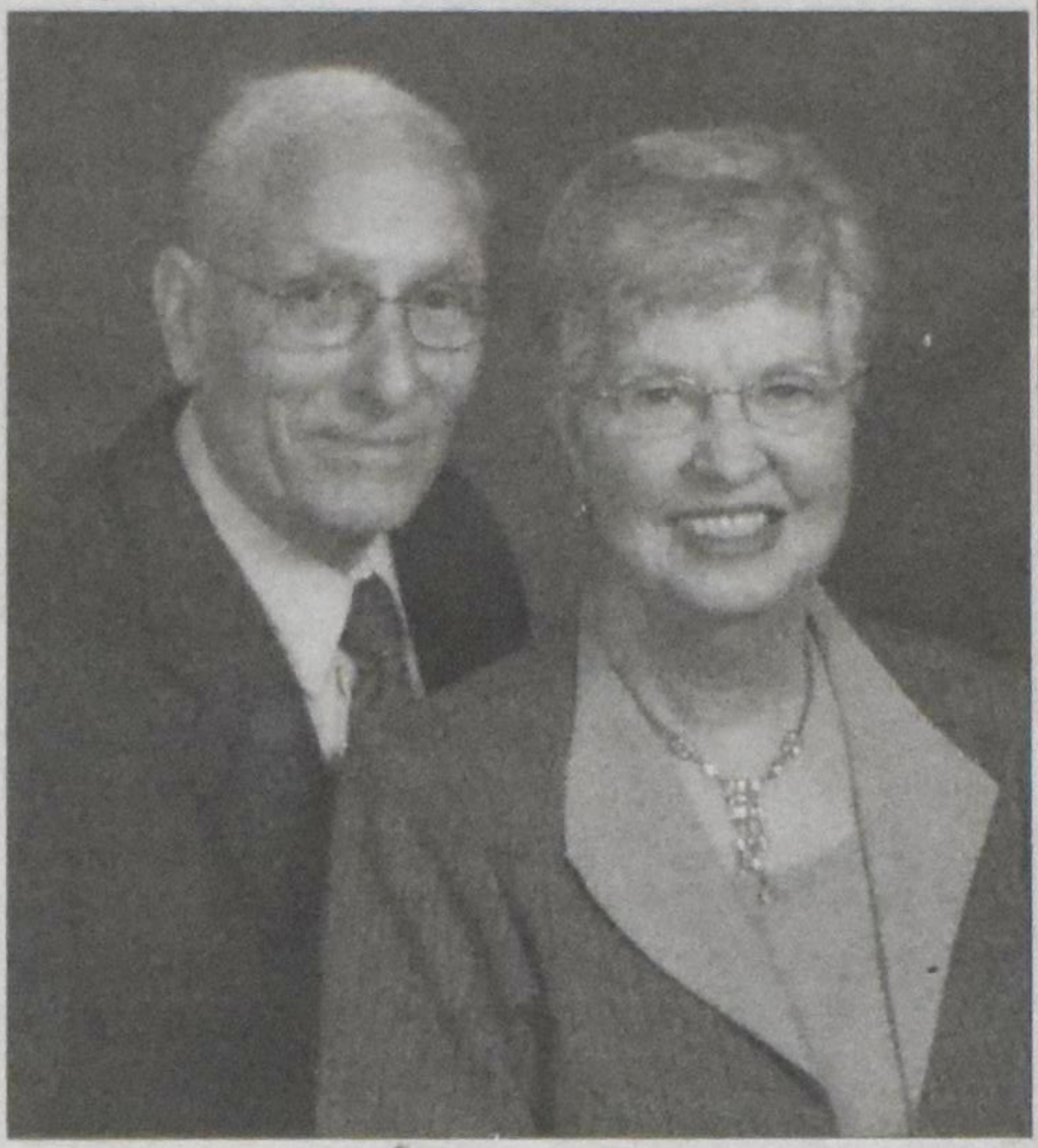

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Getting Unstuck

Arlene Van Hove

Something has to change … but what?

The challenge for parents with adult children is to "let go" and encourage them to make their own choices – especially, in terms of their future. At the same time, most parents know their children well and they should not be afraid to guide them when children are open to sharing their concerns. Talking things through helps us gain a better understanding of ourselves, which, eventually, will lead to better choices and decisions.

Question:

I am 23 years old and just finishing my third year at a university away from home. In my second year I met a young woman I fell in love with. She is presently also in her third year. At the end of the second year I took my girlfriend home to meet my family. I thought we all had a good time together. She returned to her hometown in the prairies for her summer job while I did the same on the West Coast. We emailed and spoke on the phone regularly. She came to B.C. twice for a weekend, and I dropped into her place twice.

During the summer my parents suggested my girlfriend might not be the right one for me. When I would ask specific questions my parents became evasive and unclear. During the third year at the university I ended the relationship twice. Both times I felt something was just not right between us. Mostly, I believe she does not respect me. During the times we were apart both of us were miserable and did not date anyone else. Each time we got back together again we promised to be more sensitive to each other.

I had hoped to buy her an engagement ring this summer but I am having second thoughts. I also feel frustrated that I am not able to live with or without her. I have confided some of this to my parents who are encouraging me to end the relationship and take the last year of studies at our local university so that I will not be around my girlfriend. However, I have many good friends at this university and do not want to miss my last year with them. I know something has to change in my life so that I can be more clear about were I am headed.

Response:

What I am "hearing" from you is that you are definitely having second thoughts about marrying your girlfriend. However, what the problem may be seems somewhat vague. You say she does not respect you. I suggest you flesh this out and pay attention to how she communicates this disrespect. We often forget how important our perception is in terms of how we see what is going on. Once you have a few examples and talk about it with your girlfriend, she may be surprised to hear her behavior showed disrespect. Maybe that was not her intention. You also may need to be ready to tell her what your needs are in terms of feeling respected. We can never be too clear about this issue.

You also feel frustrated because you cannot "live with her nor without her." This is a common feeling after a breakup because it is the truth. Unfortunately, breaking up with someone you love is always painful and the journey of healing can be littered with broken dreams. At the same time, I am wondering what is keeping you two together? What do you have in common? What do you both enjoy doing together? Do you have a shared faith life? What are your hopes for the future? Do you have mutual friends? What is your family life like in comparison to hers? Do you share the same values? In terms of your parents, I suggest you just be straight with them and ask specifically what they mean by suggesting you two may not be right for each other.

In conclusion, I would recommend you do not buy the engagement ring this summer and just see where the relationship may be going. While I understand your parents' concern for your last year of study, I suggest you choose the university that will give you the most meaningful year.

Arlene Van Hove (avanhove@shaw.ca) is a therapist and a member of the Fleetwood CRC.

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Pastors ponder change *... continued from p. 15*

about trusting God in seasons of change." She added, "Psalm 23 provides good metaphors about leading THROUGH the valley to better options on the other side."

Mary Ann Benjamins – Ken's wife – warned that a pastor's family can be ignored or disregarded, especially in times of change. "Some ministers' spouses have no voice. Lay leaders should try especially hard to listen to them."

Still, pastors must know their weaknesses. Ken Benjamins recognized, "We all have bad days, even bad seasons. Sometimes we question everything we're doing. That's a cue it's time to go to Florida." Ken Vander Horst offered a different solution. He suggested going to Jesus. "The pastor needs to be aware that s/he needs her/his own healing, time for retreating from pain and brokenness. Jesus regularly withdrew to renew his strength." Are there retreat centres both in Florida and near the Sea of Galilee?

After describing one rough change, one pastor confessed weariness. "It's hard to see people I thought were spiritually mature revert to 'my way or the highway.' No matter how often I preach about the body, family life, caring for others and looking to future generations, it's really frustrating. Retirement looks pretty good, even though the thought of leaving this community and congregation is painful."

Now what?

After processing our own and these other personal experiences, maybe we know too much about managing church changes. With a well-placed parting jab, Karen Wilk punched some New Testament sense into this discussion: "Only a Christendom church asks such questions [about change]. The missional church – believers in India and China where the church grows by thousands daily – would never ask them."

Are we perhaps answering questions we shouldn't bother asking?

"O Lord, who changes not, abide with us."

James C. Dekker is pastor of Covenant CRC, St. Catharines, Ontario. Some folks say he hasn't changed over the years; others say it's about time.

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See page 20 for another job ad.

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Events/Advertising

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June 26, 27 Come celebrate the 50th anniversary of HCCS (formerly Athens Christian School). Contact www.hccs.ca or 613 498 4176.

July 1 Frisian Picnic starting at 11 a.m. at Pinehurst Lake Conservation Area, **Paris**, Ontario. Free admission.

Aug 22 Dutch Service will be held in the **Ancaster** Christian Reformed Church at 3:00 p.m. Rev. Jacob Kuntz will be preaching.

Oct 16 Diaconal Ministries invites you to attend a Day of Encouragement: come to celebrate God through worship and enjoy training in ministry and learning from others at Hamilton District Christian High, **Ancaster**. The theme for the day is "Fan the Flame." Many different workshops are being prepared for you! This day is open to everyone! After August 1, 2010: contact your deacons for more information or visit www.diaconalministries.com to register.

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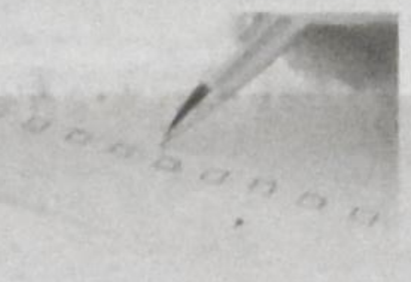

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- ❑ Sometimes.
- ❑ Not usually.

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With an eye to improving CC, please comment on any of the following: news, features, layout, or website. Feel free to use additional paper if necessary.

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News

Bell appeals across America

Emily Wierenga

Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, MI, is doing for Christianity what he says Kurt Cobain did for rock 'n roll.

"All of the sudden this guy named Cobain came along and everything changed," Bell told Vic Cuccia in an interview with *The Ooze*. "Prior to that you had like Mariah Carey or Bon Jovi but then you had this thing that was kind of emerging . . . ."

Today, a new kind of Christianity is emerging. Together with voices like Brian McLaren and Shane Claiborne, Bell is making Christ relevant.

"This is not just the same old message with new methods," the son of Judge Robert Holmes Bell told Andy Crouch of *Christianity Today*. "We're rediscovering Christianity as an Eastern religion, as a way of life. Legal metaphors for faith don't deliver a way of life. We grew up in churches where people knew the nine verses why we don't speak in tongues, but had never experienced the overwhelming presence of God."

Bell is all about re-discovering the divine in the everyday, in an unconventional way.

Bell has always had unconventional methods, in spite of seeming to do the conventional thing. Growing up in a Christian home, he attended Wheaton College in Illinois where he met his wife, Kristen, and formed an indie rock band, Ton Bundle. "I was the lead singer," Bell said. "I did the whole James Brown thing; I would like start to faint and fall over and they would bring a cape out . . . it was nuts."

The band broke up when Bell moved to Pasadena, CA, to get his M.Div at Fuller Theological Seminary. During this time, he and his wife began to question the traditional form of church.

The Jesus revolution

"To this day I meet people who go to church because they're supposed to," Bell says. "I absolutely cannot begin to comprehend that. You don't do this in any other area of your life. You take that CD out and put another CD in; I don't get it."

After moving back to Grand Rapids, MI, to be closer to family, Bell studied under Rev. Ed Dobson and, in 1999, founded Mars Hill Bible Church.

Within a year, Mars Hill had mushroomed to 3,500, due to Bell's determination to make church appealing.

"When I got into Seminary and I did my first sermons, I asked the question 'Why would we spend time doing something that isn't great?'" he explained to Cuccia. "Nowhere else in your life do you give your time to things that aren't great. You don't go sit through movies that you don't like. You don't pay for things that aren't of a certain calibre that compel you in a certain way. So when I got into teaching, my assumption was that the Jesus revolution ought to be the best thing going or do something else."

In 2000, Mars Hill, which had been gathering in a school gym in Wyoming, MI, was given an old mall in Grandville. Today the 11,000-plus members continue to meet in what they call "the shed," void of "swanky signs or big lofted logos," as stated on their website.

Bell is suspicious of mega-churches. "When you get big and God together, there is trouble there. So you have to be very, very careful," he said. "We believe that anytime a crowd gathers, if you don't immediately start asking 'How can we use this crowd and this gathering to promote the kind of thing that God cares about?' – if you don't ask that question – it becomes about yourself."

His goal has never been to create a new following, but rather, to answer the hundreds calling daily, begging, "Give us the real thing."

"I was like, 'If someone could speak to these people in their mother tongue, they'd be here in droves,'" Bell told David Van Biema of *Time.com* in 'The Hipper than thou Pastor.'

And so, he spoke in their mother tongue. And they came in droves.

The Billy Graham of YouTube

Through his messages, Bell seeks to rediscover "the Bible as a human product," rather than as a religious symbol. "The Bible is still in the centre for us," Bell added, "but it's a different kind of centre. We want to embrace mystery rather than conquer it."

To do this, Bell avoids three-point-sermons and instead delivers what Biema describes as "stand-up-style monologues," stitched together by comedy, sarcasm and irony. Bell uses the stage to dramatically present the gospel. One Sunday, he used a live goat to paint a picture of sacrifice. Releasing it, he declared, "The goat has left the building," thereby illustrating Jesus' role as the final offering.

In 2002, he began producing a series of videos called *Nooma* (from the Greek word, "pneuma," meaning "wind" or "spirit") intended to breathe life back into people's personal walks with God. Each 10-14 minute film describes an individual's short story addressing a specific topic. The goal of these 24 films is to explore the world through Jesus' perspective – to reinvent religion.

According to Biema, *Nooma* "may make [Bell] to YouTube what Graham was to the arena."

Bible professor and evangelical blogger Ben Witherington says Bell may be "one of the most important 21st century Christian leaders." Yet none of this matters to Bell.

"I don't read reviews, I don't read blogs, I don't Google my name," he said. "It just has no place in my life; I don't know what good that would do."

Instead, he concerns himself with inspiring freedom while combating fear.

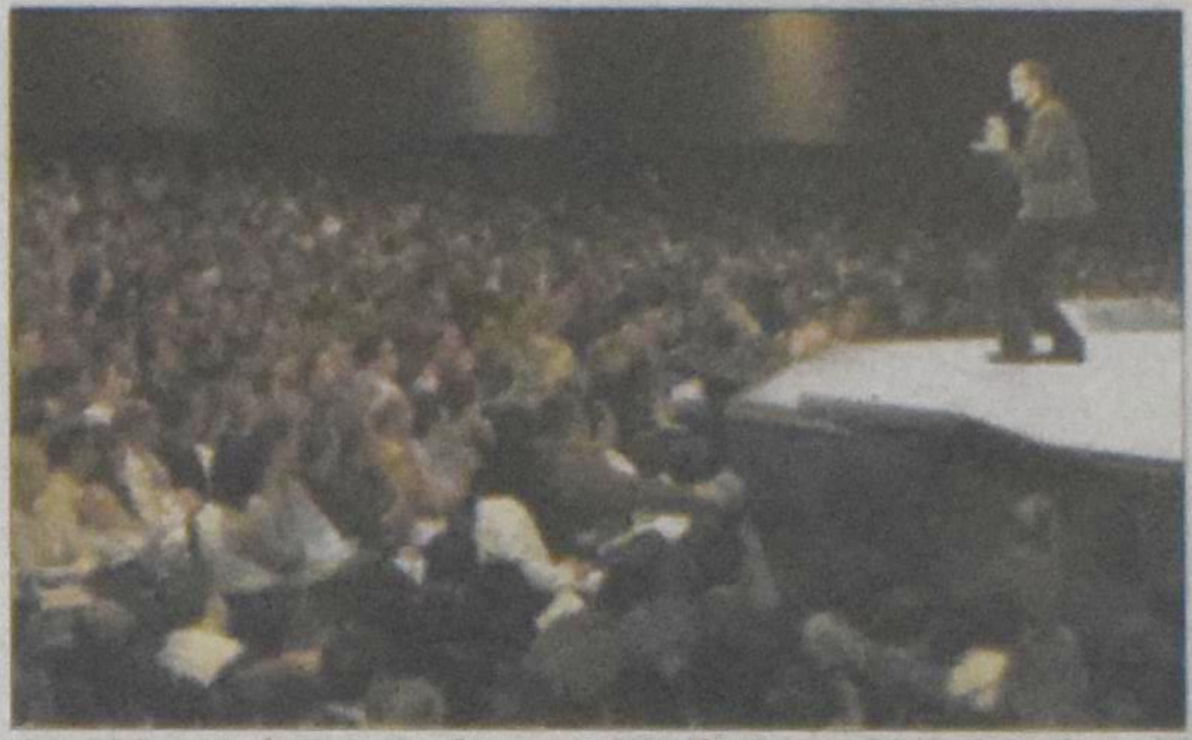
"I think that what a lot of people call religion is actually fear," he told Cuccia. "I think they say it is historic Christianity but I think it is a lot of terror and fear and shame and all sorts of other darkness, so they are not free. They are bound and terrified and working very hard to preserve and prop up whole systems and ways of thinking, living and believing things that are actually totally destructive."

In 2005, Zondervan published Bell's book *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, which is for people who are, in Bell's words, "fascinated with Jesus, but can't do the standard Christian package." This project was followed in 2007 by *Sex God: Exploring the Endless Connections between Sexuality and Spirituality* (Zondervan), and in 2009 by *Drops Like Stars* (Zondervan), a handwritten book exploring the connection between creativity and suffering.

In everything he does, Bell asks questions – hard questions – in order to "sort through what it means to be a person of faith."

"If I am serious about taking Jesus' call upon myself – taking His yoke and doing what He said to do and living how He said to live, a kingdom kind of life – if I am really serious about it, there is going to be a conflict here because the world I live in is not oriented around the Kingdom of God," he has said. "So I am going to have to wrestle through exactly what that means and that is going to raise some questions, but that is not the goal, it never has been and it not a very admirable goal.

"The goal is that the question, like everything else, would serve the greater thing here and that is us being the hands and feet of Jesus. So our goal has always been to find out how to be the people of Jesus here, and do it."



10,000 people regularly attend Bell's Mars Hill church, held in a shopping mall. Any venue that hosts Bell is packed.

Emily Wierenga is an author, artist and freelance writer who lives with her husband and son in Neerlandia, AB. For more information, please visit www.emilywierenga.com.

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